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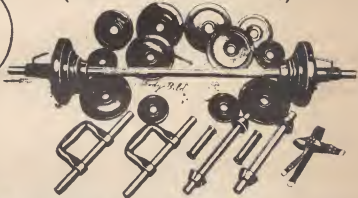
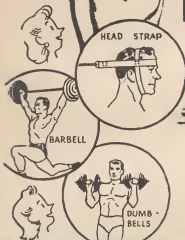


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PLANET STORIES



VOL. 5, No. 10

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

JANUARY, 1953

► *Novel of Distant Worlds*

DESIGN FOR GREAT-DAY Eric Frank Russell 4

All hail Lowson of the stronge Solorian Combine. Lowson of the Cosmos-wide supermind; Lowson the supreme egotist. Lowson who was man plus men plus other creatures . . . who, believed . . . who knew, that wits top warheads; that tactics surpass instruments; that a super-glib tongue rules the Galaxies.

► *Three Star-flung Novelets*

WAR DRUMS OF MERCURY LOST John W. Jakes 62

From the mouth of an ancient crone come the weird Mercurian curse: "We can make even the dead walk against you."

THE SUN-DEATH Stanley Whiteside 75

In the soaring *Vulcon*, that ark of abominations, the repentant Captain would sing his swan song to space.

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Joey, the smiley, was gloriously gay, ostoundingly peace-pervading. When he struck Mars it was madness . . . gorgontuan madness.

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Of the two survivors who crash-landed on Venus, only Clarke, the keenly sensitive-minded one, could see those miraculous inhabitants, those mythological weirdies. Science-minded Bainbridge, the fool, was acting like a full-fledged, normal homo.

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That evening. That strange, fateful evening, robot John sat by the fire as he had for one thousand, four hundred and twenty-eight years, four months and three days . . . but waiting now for nothing in the whole world. Nothing at all.

GROUNDLING Bryan Berry 57

Hen-pecked and grounded, that was Lorry Miller. But he was nurturing a daring plan to rid himself of both these roadblocks to glorious space.

► *Planet's Star Feature*

THE VIZIGRAPH 2 & 110

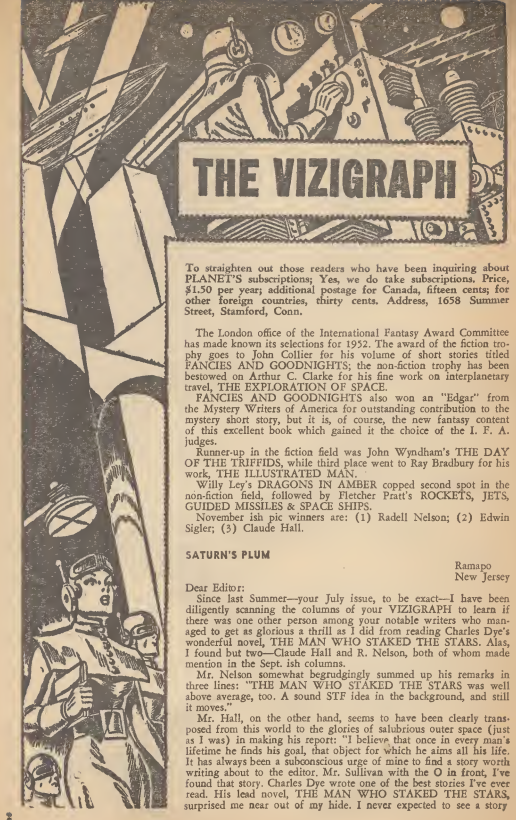
Heedeth the words of man, woman and robot.

T. T. SCOTT, President

JACK O'SULLIVAN, Editor

MALCOLM REISS, Mgr. Editor

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THE VIZIGRAPH

To straighten out those readers who have been inquiring about PLANET'S subscriptions; Yes, we do take subscriptions. Price, \$1.50 per year; additional postage for Canada, fifteen cents; for other foreign countries, thirty cents. Address, 1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.

The London office of the International Fantasy Award Committee has made known its selections for 1952. The award of the fiction trophy goes to John Collier for his volume of short stories titled FANCIES AND GOODNIGHTS; the non-fiction trophy has been bestowed on Arthur C. Clarke for his fine work on interplanetary travel, THE EXPLORATION OF SPACE.

FANCIES AND GOODNIGHTS also won an "Edgar" from the Mystery Writers of America for outstanding contribution to the mystery short story, but it is, of course, the new fantasy content of this excellent book which gained it the choice of the I. F. A. judges.

Runner-up in the fiction field was John Wyndham's THE DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS, while third place went to Ray Bradbury for his work, THE ILLUSTRATED MAN.

Willy Ley's DRAGONS IN AMBER copped second spot in the non-fiction field, followed by Fletcher Pratt's ROCKETS, JETS, GUIDED MISSILES & SPACE SHIPS.

November ish pic winners are: (1) Radell Nelson; (2) Edwin Sigler; (3) Claude Hall.

SATURN'S PLUM

Ramapo
New Jersey

Dear Editor:

Since last Summer—your July issue, to be exact—I have been diligently scanning the columns of your VIZIGRAPH to learn if there was one other person among your notable writers who managed to get as glorious a thrill as I did from reading Charles Dye's wonderful novel, THE MAN WHO STAKED THE STARS. Alas, I found but two—Claude Hall and R. Nelson, both of whom made mention in the Sept. ish columns.

Mr. Nelson somewhat begrudgingly summed up his remarks in three lines: "THE MAN WHO STAKED THE STARS was well above average, too. A sound STF idea in the background, and still it moves."

Mr. Hall, on the other hand, seems to have been clearly transposed from this world to the glories of salubrious outer space (just as I was) in making his report: "I believe that once in every man's lifetime he finds his goal, that object for which he aims all his life. It has always been a subconscious urge of mine to find a story worth writing about to the editor. Mr. Sullivan with the O in front, I've found that story. Charles Dye wrote one of the best stories I've ever read. His lead novel, THE MAN WHO STAKED THE STARS, surprised me near out of my hide. I never expected to see a story

with this theme, a real honest to goodness classic, in PLANET. The novels and stories you've been printing were all good, up to a certain extent, but nothing like this thriller. . . . I have a feeling that this story will go down in STF history as a story equal to anything ever published."

Well, Texans are prone to exaggerate but I cannot feel that way about this Lone Star stater. Charley hit the nail right on the head as far as I'm concerned. May I take this chance to tell PLANET readers to go dig out their issues and take a closer gander at the lead novel. I admit it is a bit confusing at the beginning . . . but, Oh, so very worth while after you are once into the meat of the plot. Dye's characters are outstanding; the setting most futuristic, and the plot stimulating.

A garland of Saturn's rings for the admirable Mr. Dye, please.

Sincerely,

JERRY TAYLOR

NOT IN ANGER

103 Ridge Dr.,
Toronto, Ont.,
Canada

Dear Editor,

This is my first letter to PLANET since you became the guiding hand of the ole editor-eater . . . and I'm afraid you won't be glad to see it. I saw the first issue of your mag appear on the stands in 1939 and since then I have never willingly missed an issue. Now, I've never been one of those who scoffed at PLANET STORIES as tripe. I've always felt that the mag had a personality all its own and that the few gems it published more than made up for its obvious faults. The mag has had a couple of ups and downs since inception and it's because I'm afraid it is going into another recession that I'm writing you now. To show what I mean, let's compare the Sept. '52, ish with its 1951 counterpart.

In the Sept. '51, ish PLANET was being heralded as the only STF magazine edited by a robot. But this robot must have been a nifty positronic job because he corraled Theodore Sturgeon, one of the top quality names in STF, to do the novel. Furthermore, there were ten stories as compared to 7 now and, since quality is more important than quantity, at least five of them were the equal of the current issue's top yarn. Now this odious comparison is made not out of malice, but because it illustrates a trend we fans do not like, a trend back to the mid-forties when only the first two or three yarns in PLANET could be depended on for quality. In '51 it looked as if PLANET was going to take its place among the STF renaissance in other mags. Now, I can see the mag slipping back to its older, lower standards.

So much for the destructive criticism, now for the suggestions as to how to alleviate this horrendous condition. Ole Doc Anger's remedy is very simple. It comes variously labeled, but under whatever name there's nothing like a large dose of Henry Kuttner to pep up an ailing STF mag. For my two bits he is by far the best STF author of all time and no one else has even approached his record for quantity and quality. And that includes such idols as Merritt, Bradbury, Lovecraft, Wells or Verne, too. He has more sheer writing skill than anyone has a right to and he can write in the colorful, human-interest vein favored by your mag. Kuttner has never done his best work for PLANET, but a new editor like yourself should be able to offer him an attractive deal to do some novels and shorts. He is published seldom these days, for a professional, and a Kuttner-PLANET alliance could be good for both of yuz.

Now, wiping my bloody kukri on the prostrate editor's suit, I'll turn to the stories in the current ish. (Was that Raymond Z. Gallun who screamed or just Thompson's Cat howling?)

1. THE STAR PLUNDERER by Poul Anderson:— I like these historical-transference stories and so does ye ed I guess, since there are 4 of 'em in this ish. By historical-transference I mean a story in which an author takes a historical incident from the present or past of Earth and transfers it in time to a future environment. I think this is a legitimate method of yarn-spinning since history does repeat itself with astonishing similarity. This story of an empire in the making parallels the rise of Mohammed in Arabia or Harumhab in Egypt, both of whom came out of the common rank to take over tottering empires and expand them. Poul Anderson's characterization of Manuel Argos and his imaginary society of the Gorzuni got this one first place, but it nor any other story in this ish did not give me a thrill like, say, Lee Gregor's LAST NIGHT OUT in the Sept. '51 ish.

2. EVIL OUT OF ONZAR by Mark Ganes:— This time it is the present historical crisis which is transferred to the future. Well done. Incidentally, it is a disheartening thought that there is no Onzar in the present power balance.

3. THE SLAVES OF VENUS by Edwin James:— It's a far cry from the old days to have the three long stories roll in 1, 2, 3 like this but this third historical yarn is a fine adaptation of conditions in Africa during the 19th Cent. empire-building. Too bad there wasn't a Freedom, Inc., then to give men like Leopold of Belgium or Cecil Rhodes what for. This could be the beginning of a series, but I hope not because Edwin James can write good philosophical STF and shouldn't be limited to this.

4. THE GUN by Philip K. Dick:—If this is a new author, he'll be a comer. The idea is taken from Alfred Coppel's Welcome, but the fairy tale simile is a good one here.

5. THOMPSON'S CAT by Robert Moore Williams:—A good story from an author who is usually more than good.

6. ZERO DATA by Charles Saphro:—If this is a new author let this be his last as well as first appearance.

7. BIG PILL by Raymond Z. Gallun:—In my uninformed opinion, Gallun's nuclear physics is way off. I just don't think things would happen the way he says they would. There is a tendency for some authors to think of atoms as synonymous with "magic" and I think the reliable Mr. Gallun has fallen into this trap.

RON ANGER

Ed's note: Nice to see that the tail-end of your critique contradicts the nose-end.

STRAIGHTENING EVERYBODY OUT

Box 666

Camrose, Alberta

Dear Fen: (And the Editor, too)

If a Northern neighbor may be allowed to join in this squabble among you Yankees—

1. I like Ray Bradbury and all of his stories.

2. I don't give a hoot whether the edges of PLANET are trimmed or not.

3. I like practically every cover, no matter how fantastic they are.

4. PLANET'S current artists and authors can stay on the payroll as long as they want.

5. I agree with Gregg Calkins—most STF zines

(Continued on page 110)

*A sample of unfamiliar life emerged onto the platform . . . proud
... disdainful ... magnificently indifferent to all around him.*



DESIGN FOR GREAT-DAY

By ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

All hail Lawson of the Solarian Combine. Lawson the impudent peacemaker. Lawson the mighty-minded egotist. Lawson who was man plus men plus other creatures . . . who believed . . . who knew . . . that wits top warheads; that tactics surpass instruments; that a super-glib tongue rules the Galaxies.

THE little ship, scarred and battered, sat on the plain and cooled its tubes and ignored the armed guard that had surrounded it at a safe distance. A large, bluish sun burned overhead, lit the edges of flat, waferlike clouds in brilliant purple. There were two tiny moons shining like pale specters low in the east, and a third was diving into the westward horizon.

To the north lay the great walled city whence the guard had erupted in irate haste. It was a squat, stark conglomeration of buildings in gray granite, devoid of tall towers, sitting four-square to the earth. An unbeautiful, strictly utilitarian place suitable for masses of the humble living in subservience to the harsh.

At considerable altitude above the granite mass roamed its aerial patrol, a number of tiny, almost invisible dots weaving a tangle

of vapor-trails. The dots displayed the irritated restlessness of a swarm of disturbed gnats, for their pilots were uncomfortably aware of the strange invader now sitting on the plain. Indeed, they would have intercepted it had that been possible, which it wasn't. How can one block the path of an unexpected object moving with such stupendous rapidity that its trace registers as a mere flick on a screen some seconds after the source has passed?

Upon the ground the troops kept careful watch and awaited the arrival of someone permitted the initiative that they were denied. All of them had either four legs and two arms or four arms and two legs, according to the need of the moment. That is to say: the front pair of underbody limbs could be employed as feet or hands, like those of a baboon. Superior life does not



establish itself by benefit of brains alone; manual dexterity is equally essential. The quasi-quadrupeds of this world had a barely adequate supply of the former compensated by more than enough of the latter.

Thus the watchers could and did simultaneously stare through binoculars, scratch themselves, pick their teeth and hold on to their guns. The scratching was necessary because their harness was strapped over horselike hide in lieu of clothes, and beneath the harness were the lurking places of things too small to know or care about the bigness of the big.

Although it was not for them to decide what action to take against this sorry looking object from the unknown, they had plenty of curiosity concerning it, and no little apprehension. Much of their noisiness was stimulated by the fact that the vessel was of no identifiable type despite that they could recognize all the seventy patterns common to the entire galaxy. The apprehension was created by the sheer nonchalance of the visitor's arrival. It had burst like a superswift bullet through the detector-screen that enveloped the entire planet, treated the sub-stratosphere patrols with disdain and sat itself down in clear view of the city.

Such a performance is disconcerting, especially in time of war. It brings with it the irresistible suggestion that what one can do, others can likewise achieve. It encourages morbid doubts about the real efficiency of one's own defenses. Nothing is more inviting to painful self-examination than the sudden realization that the other party can hit back. That scored and dented article on the plain was mute witness to a grim possibility and nobody derived pleasure from the thought.

Something drastic would have to be done about it, on that point one and all were agreed. But the correct tactics would be defined by authority, not by underlings. To make up his own mind one way or the other was a presumptuous task not one of them dared undertake. So they hung around in dips and behind rocks, and scratched and held their guns and hankered for high brass in the city to wake up and come running.

In much the same way that planetary defenses had been brought to nought by

bland presentation of an accomplished fact, so were the guards now disturbed by being confronted with an event when none were present who were qualified to cope. Giving distant sluggards no time to make up their minds and spring into action, the ship's lock opened and a thing came out.

AS A SAMPLE of unfamiliar life he was neither big nor fearsome. A biped with two arms, a pinkish face and close-fitting clothes, he was no taller than any of the onlookers and not more than one-third the weight. A peculiar creature in no way redoubtable. In fact he looked soft. One could jump on him with all four feet and squash him.

Nevertheless one could not hold him entirely in contempt. There were aspects that gave one to pause and think. In the first place, he was carrying no visible weapons and, moreover, doing it with the subtle assurance of one who has reason to view guns as so much useless lumber. In the second place, he was mooching airily around the ship, hands in pockets, inspecting the scarred shell for all the world as if this landing marked a boring call on tiresome relatives. Most of the time he had his back to the ring of troops, magnificently indifferent to whether or not anyone chose to blow him apart.

Apparently satisfied with his survey of the vessel, he suddenly turned and walked straight toward the hidden watchers. The ship's lock remained wide open in a manner suggesting either criminal carelessness or supreme confidence, more probably the latter. Completely at peace with a world in the midst of war, he ambled directly toward a section of guards, bringing the need for initiative nearer and nearer, making them sweat with anxiety and creating such a panic that they forgot to itch.

Rounding a rock, he came face to face with Yadiz, a common trooper momentarily paralyzed by sheer lack of an order to go forward, go backward, shoot the alien, shoot himself, or do something. He looked casually at Yadiz as if different life-forms in radically different shapes were more common than pebbles. Yadiz became so embarrassed by his own futility that he swapped his gun from hand to hand and back again.

"Surely it's not that heavy," remarked the alien with complete and surprising fluency. He eyed the gun and sniffed.

Yadiz, of course, dropped it. The feat is far from easy when one has four normally agile hands. It requires the cooperation of a mind quick to swirl into hopeless confusion. But Yadiz had a brain not to be daunted by the difficulty of the task. It muddled itself most successfully and turned all his fingers into thumbs and temporarily abolished his coordination.

He dropped the gun which promptly went off with an ear-splitting crash and a piece of rock flew into shards and something whined shrilly into the sky. The alien turned and followed the whine with his eyes until finally it died out.

Then he said to Yadiz, "Wasn't that rather silly?"

There was no need to answer. It was a conclusion Yadiz already had reached about one second before the bang. He picked up the gun with a foot-hand, transferred it to a real hand, found it upside-down, turned it right way up, got the strap tangled around his fist, had to reverse it to get the limb free, turned it right way up again.

The other studied this complicated performance with such intense interest that Yadiz, completely unnerved, decided to shoulder it in the approved on-guard position. Whereupon a harness buckle obligingly caught the firing-stud and the thing went off again. Once more the alien observed the missile's screaming flight.

Returning his attention, he inquired with pleased anticipation, "How many more tricks can you do with that?"

Some sort of answer seemed to be necessary but for the life of him Yadiz could not conceive one that was wholly satisfactory. Struck dumb, he posed there holding his weapon by the muzzle and at arm's length, like one who has recklessly grabbed a mamba and dare not let go. In all his years as a trooper, of which there were more than several, he couldn't recall a time when possession of a firearm had proved such a handicap. He was still searching in vain for a verbal means of salvaging his self-respect when another trooper arrived to break the spell.

A little breathless with haste, the new-

comer looked askance at the biped, said to Yadiz, "Who gave you orders to shoot?"

"What business is it of yours?" asked the biped, coldly disapproving. "It's his own gun, isn't it?"

This interjection took the arrival aback. He had not expected another life-form to speak with the fluency of a native, much less treat this matter of wasting ammunition from the angle of personal ownership. The thought that a trooper might have proprietary rights in his weapon had never occurred to him. And now that he had captured the thought he did not know what to do with it. He stared at his own gun as if it had just miraculously appeared in his hand, changed it to another hand by way of ensuring its realness and solidity.

"Be careful," advised the biped. He nodded toward Yadiz. "That's the way *be* started."

Yadiz felt he ought to resent that remark for some reason or other, especially since the other trooper immediately took a firmer hold on his gun in open willingness to treat the warning seriously. It suggested that the trooper and the biped had found sweet accord in their mutual belief that anything begun by Yadiz was bound to have a completely unpredictable ending. It is not pleasant to have one's condition publicly recognized and be condemned before the event.

So he scowled at his fellow trooper and demanded, "Who ordered you to leave your post, Boonsnucker?"

That last word was truly the master-touch. Boonsnucker had been tormented by the horrid name since birth. It was an unwanted burden placed upon him by malignant parents. Yadiz picked it up and bounced it on his cranium. The unfortunate Boonsnucker wilted visibly and the alien chose that moment to chip in with another confusing comment.

"It's his own post, isn't it? He doesn't *bave* to drag it with him wherever he goes."

Since the post in question had been represented by a small hollow in the ground, Yadiz had a tough time trying to decide whether or not it could be legitimately dragged. Is a trooper freely permitted to do that which is impossible?

He became a little cross-eyed in his

strenuous efforts to settle the issue. So far as he could make out the correct answer oscillated somewhere between that which is allowed and that which is feasible. It was remotely possible that Boonsnucker could exercise the privilege of either toting a hole around or leaving it where it was, provided that he had a choice about the matter. Alternatively, he might be strictly forbidden to move it from its proper place even though unable to do so. It was all very confusing and he could not understand why it was as clear as daylight to the alien.

Much encouraged by the mind-racked silence of Yadiz, plus the support offered from an unexpected quarter, Boonsnucker recovered sufficiently to explain, "I thought he might have received the order to shoot."

"Indeed?" said the biped in kindly tones.

"Yes, and I should have had the same order."

"To do what?" inquired the biped.

"To shoot," explained Boonsnucker again.

"Whom?" asked the biped, looking him straight in the eye.

Boonsnucker opened his mouth, shut it, opened it, gaped at the sky, examined his finger-nails, ate half of one of them, remembered an itch and pursued it along his harness.

"Don't you know?" the biped persisted.

"I'd better stay at my post," said Boonsnucker, backing away at a hurried shuffle. He returned to his hole, squatted within it, kept careful watch on the strange space-vessel, held himself in readiness to deal with whatever might emerge therefrom, all in accordance with instructions, so far as they went.

Turning to Yadiz, the alien said in calm, matter-of-fact tones, "Take me to Markham-wit."

Yadiz couldn't be sure whether he actually dropped the gun again or whether it leaped clean out of his hands. Anyway, it did not go off.

II

THEY met the high brass one third of the way to the city. There was an assorted truckload ranging from two to five-comet rank. Bowling along the road on

flexible tracks, the vehicle stopped almost level with them and two dozen faces peered at the alien. A paunchy individual struggled out from his seat beside the driver and confronted the ill-assorted pair. He had a red metal sun and four silver comets shining on his harness.

To Yadiz he snapped, "Who told you to desert the guard-ring and come this way?"

"Me," informed the alien, airily.

The officer jerked as if stuck with a pin, shrewdly eyed him up and down and said, "I did not expect that you could speak our language."

"I'm fully capable of speech," assured the biped. "I can read, too. In fact, without wishing to appear boastful, I'd like to mention that I can also write."

"That may be," agreed the officer, willing to concede a couple of petty aptitudes to the manifestly outlandish. He had another careful look, "Can't say that I'm familiar with your kind of life."

"Which doesn't surprise me," said the alien. "Lots of folk never get the chance to become familiar with us."

The other's color heightened. With a show of annoyance, he informed, "I don't know who you are or what you are, but you're under arrest."

"Sire," put in the aghast Yadiz, "he wishes to—"

"Did anyone tell you to speak?" demanded the officer, burning him down with his eyes.

"No, sire. It was just that—"

"Shut up!"

Yadiz swallowed hard, took on the apprehensive expression of one unreasonably denied the right to point out that the barrel is full of powder and someone has lit the fuse.

"Why am I under arrest?" inquired the alien, not in the least disturbed.

"Because I say so," the officer retorted.

"Really? Do you treat all arrivals that way?"

"At present, yes. You may know it or you may not, but right now this system is at war with the system of Nilea. We're taking no chances."

"Neither are we," remarked the biped, enigmatically.

"What do you mean by that?"

"The same as you meant. We're playing safe."

"Ah!" The other licked satisfied lips. "So you are what I suspected from the first, namely, an ally the Nileans have dug up from some very minor system that we've overlooked."

"Your suspicions are ill-founded," the alien told him. "However, I would rather explain myself higher up."

"You will do just that," promised the officer. "And the explanation had better be satisfactory."

"Or else?"

"We've a short and effective way of disposing of doubtful matters. We don't worry our heads about them." He made a sweeping motion with an arm, giving the gesture a touch of contemptuous finality. "We brush them aside for keeps."

"Well," said the alien, meditatively, "it has the merit of being a successful method—temporarily."

"It's good enough for all time," corrected the officer, becoming irritated again.

He did not care for the slow smile he got in reply. It irresistibly suggested that someone was being dogmatic and someone else knew better. Neither had he any difficulty in identifying the respective someones. The alien's apparently baseless show of quiet confidence unsettled him far more than he cared to reveal, especially with a dopey guard standing nearby and a truckload of brass looking on.

It would have been nice to attribute the two-legged's sangfroid to the usual imbecility of another life-form too dim-witted to know when its scalp was in danger. There were plenty of creatures like that: seemingly brave because unable to realize a predicament even when they were in it up to the neck. Many of the lower ranks of his own forces had that kind of guts. Nevertheless he could not shake off the uneasy feeling that this case was different. The alien looked too alert, too sharp-eyed to make like a cow.

Another and smaller truck came along the road. Waving it to a stop, he picked four two-comet officers to act as escort, shooed them into the new vehicle along with the biped who entered without comment or protest.

Through the side window he said to the officers, "I hold you personally responsible for his safe arrival at the interrogation center. Tell them I've gone on to the ship to see whether there's any more where he came from."

He stood watching on the verge while the truck reversed its direction, saw it roll rapidly toward the city. Then he clambered into his own vehicle which at once departed for the source of all the trouble.

Devoid of instructions to proceed toward town, return to the ship, stand on his head or do anything else, Yadiz leaned on his gun and patiently awaited the passing of somebody qualified to tell him.

THE interrogation center viewed the alien's advent as less sensational than the arrival of a Joppelan five-eared munkster at the zoo. Data drawn from a galaxy was at the disposal of its large staff and the said information included descriptions of four hundred separate and distinct life-forms, a few of them so fantastic that the cogent material was more deductive than demonstrative. So far as they were concerned this sample brought the record up to four hundred and one. In another century's time it might be four hundred twenty-one or fifty-one. Listing the lesser lives was so much routine.

Interviews were equally a matter of established rigmarole. They had created a standard technique involving questions to be answered, forms to be filled, conclusions to be drawn. Their ways of dealing with recalcitrants were, however, a good deal more flexible, demanding various alternative methods and a modicum of imagination. Some life-forms responded with pleasing alacrity to means of persuasion that other life-forms could not so much as sense. The only difficulty they could have with this specimen was that of thinking up an entirely new way of making him see reason.

So they directed him to a desk, giving him a chair with four arm-rests and six inches too high, and a bored official took his place opposite. The latter accepted in advance that the subject could already speak the local tongue or communicate in some other understandable manner. Nobody was sent to this place until educated sufficiently

to give the required responses.

Switching his tiny desk-recorder, the interviewer started with, "What is your number, name, code, cipher or other verbal identification?"

"James Lawson."

"Sex, if any?"

"Male."

"Age?"

"None."

"There now," said the interviewer, scenting coming awkwardness. "You must have an age."

"Must I?"

"Everyone has an age."

"Have they?"

"Look," insisted the interviewer, very patient, "nobody can be ageless."

"Can't they?"

He gave it up, murmuring, "It's unimportant anyway. His time-units are meaningless until we get his planetary data." Glancing down at his question sheet, he carried on. "Purpose of visit?" His eyes came up as he waited for the usual boring response such as, "Normal exploration." He repeated, "Purpose of visit?"

"To see Markhamwit," responded James Lawson.

The interviewer yelped, "*What?*", cut off the recorder and breathed heavily for a while. When he found voice again it was to ask, "You really mean you've come specially to see the Great Lord Markhamwit?"

"Yes."

He asked uncertainly, "By appointment?"

"No."

That did it. Recovering with great swiftness, the interviewer became aggressively officious and growled, "The Great Lord Markhamwit sees nobody without an appointment."

"Then kindly make one for me."

"I'll find out what can be done," promised the other, having no intention of doing anything whatsoever. Turning the recorder on again, he resumed with the next question.

"Rank?"

"None."

"Now look here—"

"I said *none!*" repeated Lawson.

"I heard you. We'll let it pass. It's a

minor point that can be brought out later." With that slightly sinister comment he tried the next question. "Location of origin?"

"The Solarian Combine."

Flip went the switch as the unlucky desk instrument again got put out of action. Leaning backward, the interviewer rubbed his forehead. A passing official glanced at him, stopped.

"Having trouble, Dilmur?"

"Trouble?" he echoed bitterly. He mooned at his question sheet. "What a day! One thing after another! Now this!"

"What's the matter?"

He pointed an accusative finger at Lawson. "First he pretends to be ageless. Then he gives the motive behind his arrival as that of seeing the Great Lord without prior arrangement." His sigh was deep and heartfelt. "Finally, to top it all, he claims that he comes from the Solarian Combine."

"H'm! Another theological nut," diagnosed the passerby. "Don't waste your time on him. Pass him along to the mental therapists." Giving the subject of the conversation a cold look of reproof he continued on his way.

"You heard that?" The interviewer felt for the recorder-switch in readiness to resume operation. "Now do we get on with this job in a reasonable and sensible manner or must we resort to other, less pleasant methods of discovering the truth?"

"The way you put it implies that I am a liar," said Lawson, displaying no resentment.

"Not exactly. Perhaps you are a deliberate but rather stupid liar whose prevarications will gain him nothing. Perhaps you may have no more than a distorted sense of humor. Or you may be completely sincere because completely deluded. We have had visionaries here before. It takes all sorts to make a universe."

"Including Solarians," Lawson remarked.

"The Solarians are a myth," declared the interviewer with all the positiveness of one stating a long-established fact.

"There are no myths. There are only gross distortions of half-remembered truths."

"So you still insist that you are a Solarian?"

"Certainly."

The other shoved the recorder aside, got

up from his seat. "Then I can go no further with you." He summoned several attendants, pointed to the victim. "Take him to Kasine."

III

THE individual named Kasine suffered glandular maladjustment that made him grossly obese. He was just one great big bag of fat relieved only by a pair of deep-sunk but brilliantly glittering eyes.

Those optics looked at Lawson in much the same way that a cat stares at a cornered mouse. Completing the inspection, he operated his recorder, listened to a play-back of what had taken place during the previous interview.

Then a low, reverberating chuckle sounded in his huge belly and he commented, "Ho-ho, a Solarian! And lacking a pair of arms at that! Did you mislay them someplace?" Leaning forward with a manifest effort, he licked thick lips and added, "What a dreadful fix you'll be in if you lose the others also!"

Lawson gave a disdainful snort. "For an alleged mental therapist you're long overdue for treatment yourself."

It did not generate the fury that might well have been aroused in another. Kasine merely wheezed with amusement and looked self-satisfied.

"So you think I'm sadistic, eh?"

"Only at the time you made that remark. Other moments: other motivations."

"Ah!" grinned Kasine. "Whenever you open your mouth you tell me something useful."

"You could do with it," Lawson opined.

"And it seems to me," Kasine went on, refusing to be baited, "that you are not an idiot."

"Should I be?"

"You should! Every Solarian is an imbecile." He ruminated a moment, went on, "The last one we had here was a many-tendriled octoped from Quamis. The authorities on his home planet wanted him for causing an end-of-the-world panic. His illusion of Solarianism was strong enough to make the credulous believe it. But we aren't foolish octopeds here. We cured him in the end."

"How?"

Kasine thought again, informed, "If I remember aright, we fed him a coated pellet of sodium and followed it with a jar of water. Whereupon he surrendered his stupidities with much fuss and shouting. He confessed his purely Quamistic origin shortly before his insides exploded." Kasine wagged his head in patronizing regret. "Unfortunately, he died. Very noisily, too."

"Bet you enjoyed every instant of it," said Lawson.

"I was not there. I dislike a mess."

"It will be worse when it's your turn," observed Lawson, eyeing the enormous body.

Heaving himself forward, Kasine demanded, "Exactly what do you mean by that?"

"You live among your own kind, and every dog has its day."

"Dog? What in the seven suns is a dog?"

"I forgot. You don't have them here. Let's say that every skouniss has its bite."

"Is that so? Well, let me tell—" He stopped as a little gong sounded in the depths of his desk. Feeling under the rim, he pulled out a small plug at the end of a line, inserted it in an ear and listened. After a while he put it back, stared at the other. "Two officers tried to enter your ship."

"That was foolish."

Kasine said heavily, "They are now lying on the ground outside, completely paralyzed."

"What did I tell you?" commented Lawson, rubbing it in.

Smacking a fat hand on the desk, Kasine made his voice loud. "What caused it?"

"Like all your kind, they are allergic to formic acid," Lawson informed. "It's a fact I had ascertained in advance." He gave a careless shrug. "A shot of diluted ammonia will cure them and they'll never have rheumatics as long as they live."

"I want no abstruse technicalities," harshed Kasine. "I want to know what caused it."

"Probably Freddy," thought Lawson, little interested. "Or maybe it was Lou. Or possibly Buzwuz."

"Buzwuz?" Kasine's eyes came up a bit from their fatty depths. He wheezed a while before he said, "The message informs that both were stabbed in the back of the neck

by something tiny, orange-colored and winged. What was it?"

"A Solarian."

HIS self-control beginning to slip, Kasine became louder. "If you are a Solarian, which you are not, this other thing cannot be a Solarian too."

"Why not?"

"Because it is totally different. It has not the slightest resemblance to you in any one respect."

"Afraid you're wrong there."

"Why?"

"It is intelligent." Lawson examined the other as though curious about an elephant with a trunk at both ends. "Let me tell you that intelligence has nothing whatever to do with shape, form or size."

"Do you call it intelligent to stab someone in the neck?" asked Kasine, pointedly.

"In the circumstances, yes. Besides, the resulting condition is harmless and easily curable. That's more than you can say for an exploded belly."

"We'll do something about this." Kasine was openly irritated.

"It won't be easy. Take Buzwuz, for instance. Though he's small even for a bumble-bee from Callisto, he can lay out six horses in a row before he has to squat down someplace and generate more acid."

"Bumble-bee?" Kasine's brows tried to draw together over thick rolls of flesh. "Horses?"

"Forget them," advised Lawson. "You know nothing of either."

"Maybe not, but I do know this: they won't like it when we fill the ship with a lethal gas."

"They'll laugh themselves silly. And it won't pay you to make my vessel uninhabitable."

"No?"

"No! Because those already out of it will have to stay out. Most of the others will get out fast in spite of anything you can do to prevent their escape. After that, they'll have no choice but to settle down and live here. I would not like that if I were you. I wouldn't care for it one little bit."

"Wouldn't you?"

"Not if I were you which, fortunately, I am not. A world soon becomes mighty un-

comfortable when you've got to share it with hard-to-catch enemies steadily breeding a thousand to your one."

Kasine jerked and queried with some apprehension, "Mean to say they'll actually remain here and increase that fast?"

"What else would you expect them to do once you've taken away their sanctuary? Go jump in the lake just to please you? They're intelligent, I tell you. They will survive even if they have to paralyze every one of your kind in sight and make it permanent."

The gong clanged again. Inserting the ear-plug, Kasine listened, scowled, shoved it back into its place. For a short time he sat glowering across the desk. When he did speak it was irefully.

"Two more," he said. "Flat out."

Registering a thin smile, Lawson suggested, "Why not leave my ship alone and let me see Markhamwit?"

"Get this into your head," retorted Kasine. "If any and every crackpot who chose to land on this planet could walk straight in to see the Great Lord there would have been trouble long ago. The Great Lord would have been assassinated ten times over."

"He must be popular!"

"You are impertinent. You do not appear to realize the peril of your own position." Leaning forward with a grunt of discomfort, Kasine hushed his tones in sheer awe of himself. "Outside that door are those empowered merely to ask questions. Here, within this room, it is different. Here, I make decisions."

"Takes you a long time to get to them," said Lawson, unimpressed.

Ignoring it, the other went on, "I can decide whether or not your mouth gives forth facts. If I deem you a liar, I can decide whether or not it is worth turning to less tender means of obtaining the real truth. If I think you too petty to make even your truths worth having, I can decide when, where and how we shall dispose of you." He slowed down by way of extra emphasis. "All this means that I can order your immediate death."

"The right to blunder isn't much to boast about," Lawson told him.

"I do not think your effective removal

would be an error," Kasine countered. "Those creatures in your ship are impotent so far as this room is concerned. What is to prevent me from having you destroyed?"

"Nothing."

"Ah!" Slightly surprised by this frank admission, the fat face became gratified. "You agree that you are helpless to save yourself?"

"In one way, yes. In another, no."

"Meaning?"

"You can have me slaughtered if you wish. It will be a little triumph for you if you like that sort of thing." Lawson's eyes came up, looked levelly at the other's. "It would be wisest if you enjoyed the triumph to the full and made the very most of it, for it won't last long."

"Won't it?"

"Pleasure is for today. Regrets are for tomorrow. After the feast, the reckoning."

"Oho? And who will present the bill?"

"The Solarian Combine."

"THERE you go again!" Kasine rubbed his forehead wearily. "The Solarian Combine. I am sick and tired of it. Forty times have I faced so-called Solarians all of whom proved to be maniacs escaped or expelled from some not too faraway planet. But I'll give you your due for one thing: you're the coolest and most collected of the lot."

"I suspect that it is going to be rather difficult to bring you to your senses. We may have to concoct an entirely new technique to deal with you."

"Too bad," said Lawson, sympathetically.

"Therefore I—" Kasine broke off as the door opened and a five-comet officer entered in a hurry.

"Message from the Great Lord," announced the newcomer. He shot an uneasy glance at Lawson before he went on. "Regardless of any conclusion to which you may have come, you are to preserve this arrival intact, unharmed."

"That's taking things out of my hands," grumbled Kasine. "Am I not supposed to know the reasons?"

Hesitating a moment, the officer said, "I was not told to keep them from you."

"Then what are they?"

"This example of other-life must be kept

in fit condition to talk. Reports have now come in from the defense department and elsewhere. We want to know how his ship slipped through the planetary detector-screen, how it got past the aerial patrols. We want to know why the vessel differs from all known types in the galaxy, where it comes from, what gives it such tremendous velocity. In particular, we must find out the capabilities and military potential of those who built the boat."

Kasine blinked at this recital. Each of these questions, he felt, was fully loaded and liable to go bang. The mind behind his ample features worked overtime. For all his gross bulk he was not without mental agility. And one thing he'd always been good at sniffing was the smell of danger.

Words and phrases whirled through his calculating brain: slipped past, origin, type of ship, tremendous velocity, bumble-bees, the coolest and most collected. His brilliant and sunken eyes examined Lawson again. In the light of what the officer had brought he could now see more clearly the feature of this strange biped that inwardly had worried him most. It was a somewhat appalling certitude!

He felt impelled to take a gamble. If it did not come off he had nothing serious to lose.

If it did he would get the credit for great perspicacity.

Very slowly, Kasine said, "I think I can answer those questions in part. This creature claims that he is a Solarian. I consider it remotely possible that he may be!"

"May be! A Solarian!" The officer stutted a bit, backed toward the door. "The Great Lord must know of this. I will tell him your decision at once."

"It is not a decision," warned Kasine, hastily insuring himself against future wrath. "It is no more than a modest opinion."

He watched the other go out. Already he was beginning to wonder whether he had adopted the correct tactics or whether there was some other, as yet unperceived but safer play.

His gaze turned toward the subject of his thoughts.

Lawson said, very comfortingly, "You've just saved your fat neck."

IV

MARKHAMWIT went through the data for the fourth time, pushed the papers aside, walked restlessly up and down the room.

"I don't like this incident. I view it with the greatest suspicion. We may be victims of a Nilean trick."

"That is possible, my lord," endorsed Minister Ganne.

"Let's suppose they've invented an entirely new type of vessel they've reason to think invincible. The obvious step is to test it as conclusively as can be done. They must try it out before they adopt it in large numbers. If it can penetrate our defenses, land here and get out again, it's a success."

"Quite, my lord." Ganne had built his present status on a firm foundation of consistent agreement.

"But it would be a giveaway if it arrived with a Nilean crew aboard," Markhamwit went on, looking sour. "So they hunt for and obtain a non-Nilean life-form as ally. He comes here hiding himself behind a myth." He smacked one pair of hands together, then the other pair. "All this is well within the limits of probability. Yet, as Kasine thinks, the arrival's story may be true."

Ganne doubted it but refrained from saying so. Now and again the million-to-one chance turned up to the confusion of all who had brashly denied its possibility.

"Get me Zigstrom," decided Markhamwit suddenly. When the connection had been made he fitted the ear-plug, spoke into the thin tube, "Zigstrom, we have many authorities on the Solarian Myth. I have heard it said there are one or two who believe it to have a real basis. Who is the chief of these?"

He listened a bit, growled, "Don't hedge with me. I want his name. He has nothing to fear." A pause followed by, "Alemp? Find him for me. I must have him here without delay."

The required expert turned up in due course, sweaty with haste, dishevelled and ill at ease. He came hesitantly into the room, bowing low at every second step.

"My lord, if Zigstrom has given you the impression that I am a leader of one of

these foolish cults, I must assure you that—"

"Don't be so jittery," Markhamwit snapped. "I wish to pick your mind, not deprive you of your bowels." Taking a chair, he rested his four arms on its rests, fixed authoritative eyes upon the other. "You believe that the Solarian Myth is something more than a frontier legend. I want to know why."

"The story has repetitive aspects that are too much for mere coincidence," said Alemp. "And there are other and later items I consider significant."

"I have no more than perfunctory knowledge of the tale," Markhamwit informed. "In my position I've neither time nor inclination to study the folklore of our galaxy's outskirts. Be more explicit. You have been brought here to talk, not to suffer."

Alemp plucked up courage. "At one edge of our galaxy are eight populated solar systems fairly close together and arranged in a semi-circle. They have a total of thirty-nine planets. At what would be the center of their circle lies a ninth system with seven inhabitable planets devoid of any life higher than the animals."

"I am aware of that much," commented Markhamwit. "Carry on."

"The eight populated systems have never developed space travel even to the present day. Yet when we first visited them we found they knew many things about each other impossible to learn by astronomical observation. They had a strange story to account for this knowledge. They said that at some unspecified time in the very far past they'd had repeated visits from the ships of the Elmones, a life-form occupying this ninth and now deserted system. All eight believe that the Elmones ultimately intended to master them by ruthless use of superior techniques. They were to be subdued and could do nothing effective to prevent it."

"But they weren't," Markhamwit observed.

"No, my lord. It is at this point that the myth really begins. All eight systems tell the same story. That is an important thing to remember. That is what I call too much for coincidence."

"Get on with it," ordered the Great Lord, showing a touch of impatience.

Continuing hurriedly, Alemph said, "Just at this time a strange vessel emerged from the mighty gulf between our galaxy and the next one, made its landing on the Elmones' system as the most highly developed in that area. It carried a crew of two small bipeds. They claimed the seemingly impossible feat of having crossed the gulf. They called themselves Solarians. There was only one piece of evidence to support their amazing claim: their vessel had so tremendous a turn of speed that while in flight it could neither be seen nor detected."

"And then?"

"THE Elmones were by nature incurably brutal and ambitious. They slaughtered the Solarians and pulled the ship to pieces in an effort to discover its secret. They failed absolutely. Many, many years later a second Solarian vessel plunged out of the enormous void. It came in search of the first and it soon suffered the same fate. Again its secret remained inviolable."

"I can credit that much," said Markhamwit. "Alien techniques are elusive when one cannot even imagine the basis from which they've started. Why, the Nileans have been trying—" He changed his mind about going on, snapped, "Continue with your story."

"It would seem from what occurred later that this second ship had borne some means of sending out a warning signal for, many years afterward, a third and far larger vessel appeared but made no landing. It merely circled each Elmones planet, dropped thousands of messages saying that where death is concerned it is better to give than receive. Maybe it also bathed each planet in an unknown ray, or momentarily embedded it in a force-field such as we cannot conceive, or dropped minute bacteria along with the messages. Nobody knows. The vessel disappeared into the dark chasm whence it came and to the present day the cause of what followed has remained a matter for speculation."

"And what did follow?"

"Nothing immediately. The Elmones made a hundred crude jokes about the messages which soon became known to the other eight systems. The Elmones proceeded with preparations to enslave their neighbors. A

year later the blow fell, or it would be better to say began to fall. It dawned upon them that their females were bearing no young. Ten years later they were frantic. In fifty years they were numerically weak and utterly desperate. In one hundred years they had disappeared forever from the scheme of things. The Solarians had killed nobody, injured nobody, shed not a single drop of blood. They had contented themselves with denying existence to the unborn. The Elmones had been eliminated with a ruthlessness equal to their own but without their brutality. They have gone. There are now no Elmones in our galaxy or anywhere in Creation."

"A redoubtable tale ready-made for the numerous charlatans who have tried to exploit it," said Markhamwit. "The credulous are always with us. I am not easily to be taken in by tall tales of long ago. Is this all your evidence?"

"Begging your pardon, my lord," offered Alemph. "There are the seven inhabitable but deserted worlds still in existence. There is precisely the same story told by eight other systems who remained out of touch until we arrived. And, finally, there are these constant rumors."

"What rumors?"

"Of small, biped-operated and quite uncatchable ships occasionally visiting the smallest systems and loneliest planets in our galaxy."

"Bah!" Markhamwit made a gesture of derision. "We receive such a report every hundredth day. Our vessels repeatedly have investigated and found nothing. The lonely and the isolated will concoct any fanciful incident likely to entice company. The Nileans probably invent a few themselves, hoping to draw our ships away from some other locality. Why, we blew apart their battleship *Narsan* when it went to Dhurg to look into a story we'd permitted to reach their stupid ears."

"Perhaps so, my lord." Having gone so far, Alemph was not to be put off. "But permit me to point out that well as we may know our own galaxy, we know nothing of others."

Markhamwit eyed Minister Ganne. "Do you consider it possible for an intergalactic chasm to be crossed?"

"It seems incredible, my lord," said Ganne, more than anxious not to commit himself. "Not being an astronautical expert I am hardly qualified to give an opinion."

"A characteristic ministerial evasion," scoffed Markhamwit. Resorting to his ear plug and voice tube again, he asked for Sector Commander Yelm, demanded, "Regardless of the practical aspect, do you think it theoretically possible for anyone to reach us from the next galaxy?" Silence while he listened, then, "Why not?" He listened again, cut off, turned to the others. "That's his reason: nobody lives for ten thousand years."

"How does he know, my lord?" asked Alemph.

HALF a dozen guards conducted James Lawson to the august presence. They formed themselves into a stiff, expressionless row outside the door while he went into the room.

His approach from the entrance to the middle of the floor was imperturbable. Nothing in his manner betrayed slightest consciousness that he was very far from home and among a strange kind. Indeed, he mooched in casually as if sent on a minor errand to buy a pound of crackers.

Indicating a chair, Markhamwit spent most of a minute weighing up the visitor, then voiced his scepticism. "So you are a Solarian?"

"I am."

"You come from another galaxy?"

"That is correct."

Markhamwit shot a now-watch-this glance at Minister Ganne before he asked, "Is it not remarkable that you can speak our language?"

"Not when you consider that I was chosen for that very reason," replied Lawson.

"Chosen? By whom?"

"By the Combine, of course."

"For what purpose?" Markhamwit insisted.

"To come here and have a talk with you."

"About what?"

"This war you're having with the Nileans."

"I knew it!" Folding his top arms, Markhamwit looked self-satisfied. "I knew the Nileans would come into this somewhere."

His chuckle was harsh. "They are amateurish in their schemings. The least they could have done for you was to think up a protective device better than a mere myth."

"I am little interested in protective devices," said Lawson, carelessly. "Theirs or yours."

Markhamwit frowned. "Why not?"

"I am a Solarian."

"Is that so?" He showed his teeth, thin, white and pointed. "In that case our war with Nilea is none of your business."

"Agreed. We view it with splendid indifference."

"Then why come to talk about it?"

"Because we object to one of its consequences."

"To which one do you refer?" inquired Markhamwit, no more than mildly curious.

"Both sides are roaming the spaceways in armed vessels and looking for trouble."

"What of it?"

Lawson said, "The spaceways are free. They belong to everyone. No matter what rights a planet or a system may claim for its own earthly territory, the void between worlds is common property."

"Who says so?" demanded Markhamwit, scowling.

"We say so."

"Really?" Taken aback by the sheer impudence of it, the Great Lord invited a further display by asking, "And what makes Solarians think they can lay down the law?"

"We have only one reason," Lawson told him. His eyes took on a certain coldness. "We have the power to enforce it."

The other rocked back, glanced at Minister Ganne, found that worthy studiously examining the ceiling.

"The law we have established and intend to maintain," Lawson went on, "is that every space-going vessel shall have the right of unobstructed passage between worlds. What happens after it lands does not concern us unless it happens to be one of our own." He paused a moment, still cold-eyed, added, "Then it does concern us very much."

Markhamwit did not like that. He didn't like it one little bit. It smacked of an open threat and his natural instinct was to react with a counter-threat. But the interview with Alemph was still fresh in his mind and he could not rid his thoughts of certain

phrases that kept running around and around like a dire warning.

"Fifty years later they were weak and desperate. In a hundred years they were gone—forever!"

He found himself wondering whether even now the ship in which this biped had arrived was ready to broadcast or radiate an invisible, unshieldable power designed to bring about the same result. It was a horrid thought. As a method of coping with incurably antagonistic life-forms it was so perfect because so permanent. It smacked of the appalling technique of Nature herself, who never hesitated to exterminate a biological error.

One tended to think that this biped was talking out of the back of his neck. The tendency was born of hope that it was nothing but a tremendous bluff waiting to be called. One could call it all too easily by removing the bluffer's headpiece and tearing his ship apart.

As the Elmones were said to have done. What Elmones? There were none!

Suppose that it was not bluff?

V

MUCH as he hated to admit it even to himself, the situation had unexpectedly shaped up into a tough one. If in fact it was a cunning Nilean subterfuge it was becoming good enough to prove mighty awkward.

A ship had been dumped on this world, the governmental center of a powerful system at war. On the strength of an ancient fable and its pilot's glib tongue it claimed the ability to sterilize the entire planet. Therefore it was in effect either a mock-bomb or a real one. The only way in which to ascertain its real nature was to hammer on its detonator and try make it explode.

Could he dare?

Playing for time, Markhamwit pointed out, "War is a two-sided affair. Our battle-ships are not the only ones patrolling in space."

"We know it," Lawson informed. "The Nileans are also being dealt with."

"You mean you've another ship there?"

"Yes." Lawson registered a faint grin.

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"The Nileans are stuck with the same problem, and doubtless are handicapped by the dark suspicion that it's another of your tricks."

The Great Lord perked up. It gave him malicious satisfaction to think of the enemy in a jam and cursing him for it. Then his mind suddenly perceived a way of at least partially checking the truth of the other's statements. He turned to Ganne.

"That neutral world of Vaile still has contact with both sides. Go beam it a call. As if the Nileans have a vessel claiming to be of Solarian origin."

Ganne went out. The answer could not be expected before nightfall yet he was back with it in a few moments.

Shaken and nervous, he reported, "The operators say Vaile called a short time ago. A similar question was put to us at the request of the Nileans."

"Hah!" Markhamwit found himself being unwillingly pushed toward Alemp's way of looking at the matter. Folklore, he decided, might possibly be founded on fact. Indeed, it was more likely to have a positive basis than not. Long-term effects had to have faraway causes.

Then just as he was nearing the conclusion that Solarians actually do exist it struck him with awful force that if this were a crafty stunt pulled by the Nileans they could be depended upon to back up their stooge in every foreseeable manner. The call through Vaile could be nothing more than a carefully planned by-play designed to lend verisimilitude to their deception. If so, it meant that he was correct in his first assumption: that the Solarian Myth was rubbish.

These two violently opposed aspects of the matter got him in a quandary. His irritation mounted because one used to making swift and final decisions cannot bear to squat on the horns of a dilemma. And he was so squatting.

If Solarians were a lot of bunkum it meant that the enemy were successfully making a fool of him. If they were real, and possessed one-tenth the power rumored and implied, he might easily make a prize fool of himself, with disastrous results. One way or the other, he looked like being some sort of idiot.

Obviously riled, he growled at Lawson, "The right to unobstructed passage covers our vessels as much as anyone else's."

"It covers no warship bearing instructions to intercept, question, search or detain any other spaceship it considers suspicious," declared the other. "Violators of the law are not entitled to claim protection of the law."

"Can you tell me how to conduct a war between systems without sending armed ships through space?" asked Markhamwit, bitterly sarcastic.

Lawson waved an indifferent hand. "We aren't the least bit interested in that problem. It is your own worry."

"It cannot be done," Markhamwit shouted.

"That's most unfortunate," remarked Lawson, full of false sympathy. "It creates an awful state of no-war."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"Is peace funny?"

"War is a serious matter," bawled Markhamwit, striving to retain a grip on his temper. "It cannot be ended with a mere flick of the finger."

"The fact should be borne in mind by those who so nonchalantly start them," advised Lawson, quite unmoved by the Great Lord's ire.

"The Nileans started it."

"They say that you did."

"They are incorrigible liars."

"That's their opinion of you, too."

A menacing expression on his face, Markhamwit said, "Do you believe them?"

"We never believe opinions."

"You are evading my question. Somebody has to be a liar. Who do you think it is?"

"We haven't looked into the root-causes of your dispute. It is not our woe. So without any data to go upon we can only hazard a guess."

"Go ahead and do some hazarding then," Markhamwit invited. He licked expectant lips.

"Probably both sides have little regard for the truth," opined Lawson, undeterred by the other's attitude. "It is the usual setup. When war breaks out the unmitigated liar comes into his own. His heyday lasts for the duration. After that, the victorious liars hang the vanquished ones."

Had this viewpoint been one-sided Markhamwit could have taken it up with suitable fury. A two-sided opinion is disconcerting. It's slippery. One cannot get an effective grip on it.

So he changed his angle of attack by asking, "Let's suppose I reject your law and have you shot forthwith. What happens then?"

"You'll be sorry."

"I have only your word for that."

"If you want proof you know how to get it," Lawson pointed out.

IT WAS an impasse over which the Great Lord brooded with the maximum of disgust. He was realizing for the first time that by great daring one creature could defy a world of others. It had pregnant possibilities of which he had never previously thought. Some ingenious use could have been made of it, to the great discomfort of the enemy—assuming that the enemy had not thought of it first and were now using it against him.

There was the real crux of the matter, he decided. Somehow, anyhow, he had to find out whether the Nileans had a hand in this affair. If they had they would make every effort to conceal the fact. If they had not they would be only too willing to show him that his troubles were also theirs.

But then again, how deep was their cunning? Was it more than equal to his own perceptive abilities? Might they not be ready and willing to hide the truth behind a smoke-screen of pathetically eager cooperation?

If this new ship actually was a secret Nilean production it followed that those who could build one could equally well build two. Also, the unknown allied world that had provided a biped stooge plus some winged, stinging creatures could provide a second set of pseudo-Solarians.

So even now another fake extra-galactic vessel and crew might be grounded on Nilean territory waiting the inspection of his own or some neutral deputation; everything prepared to convince him that fiction is fact that thereby persuade him to recall all warships from the spaceways. That would leave the foe a clear field for long enough to enable them to grasp victory. He

and his kind would know that they had been taken for a ride only when it was too late.

About the sole crumb of comfort he could find was the thought that if this were not an impudent hoax, if all this Solarianism were genuine and true, then the Nileans themselves were being tormented by exactly the same processes of reasoning. At this very moment they might be viewing with serious misgivings the very outfit that was causing all his bother, wondering whether or not the ship was supporting evidence born of the Great Lord's limitless foresight.

This picture of the Nileans' predicament served to soothe his liver sufficiently to let him ask, "In what way do you expect me to acknowledge this law of yours?"

Lawson said, "By ordering the immediate return of all armed vessels to their planetary bases."

"They'll be a fat lot of use to us just sitting on their home stations."

"I don't agree. They will still be in fighting trim and ready to oppose any attack. We deny nobody the right to defend themselves."

"That's exactly what we're doing right now," declared Markhamwit. "Defending ourselves."

"The Nileans say the same."

"I have already told you that they are determined and persistent liars."

"I know, I know." Lawson brushed it aside like a subject already worn thin. "So far as we are concerned you can smother every one of your own worlds under an immense load of warships ready to annihilate the first attacker. But if they fight at all it must be in defense of their territory. They must not roam around wherever they please and carry the war someplace else."

"But—"

"Moreover," Lawson went on, "you can have a million ships roaming freely through space if you wish. Their numbers, routes or destinations would be nobody's business, not even ours. We won't object so long as each and every one of them is a peaceful trader going about its lawful business and in no way interfering with other people's ships."

"You won't object?" echoed Markhamwit, his temper again tried by the other's

airy self-confidence. "That is most gracious of you!"

Lawson eyed him coolly. "The strong can afford to be gracious."

"Are you insinuating that we are not strong?"

"Reasonableness is strength. Irrationality is weakness."

Banging a hand on a chair arm, Markhamwit declaimed, "There are many things I may be, but there is one thing I am not: I am not irrational."

"It remains to be seen," said Lawson significantly.

"And it will be seen! I have not become the ruler of a great system by benefit of nothing. My people do not serve under a leader whose sole qualification is imbecility. Given time for thought and the loyal support of those beneath me, I can cope with this situation or any other that may come along."

"I hope so," offered Lawson in pious tones. "For your own sake."

Markhamwit leaned forward, exposed his square teeth once more and spoke slowly. "No matter what decision I may come to or what consequences may follow, the skin in danger is not mine. It is yours!" He straightened up, made a motion of dismissal. "I will give my answer in the morning. Until then, do plenty of worrying about yourself!"

"A Solarian deeply concerned about his own fate," Lawson informed, his hand on the door, "would be rather like one of your hairs bothered about falling out." Opening the door, he stared hard at the Great Lord and added, "The hair goes and is lost and becomes at one with the dust, but the body remains."

"Meaning—?"

"You're not dealing with me as an individual. You are dealing with my kind!"

VI

THE guard alerted and accompanied Lawson to the interrogation center, left him at the precise spot where they had first picked him up. Going through the door, he closed it behind him, thus cutting himself off from their view. In leisurely manner he ambled past desks where examiners looked

up from their eternal piles of forms to watch him uncertainly. He had reached the main exit before anyone saw fit to dispute his progress.

An incoming three-comet officer barred his way and asked, "Where are you going?"

"Back to my ship."

The other showed vague surprise. "You have seen the Great Lord?"

"Of course. I have just left him." Then with a confiding air, "We had a most interesting conversation. He wishes to consult with me again first thing in the morning."

"Does he?" The officer's eyes hugely magnified Lawson's importance. It did not take him a split second to conceive a simple piece of logic: to look after Markhamwit's guest would be to please Markhamwit himself. So with praiseworthy opportunism he said, "I will get a truck and run you back."

"That is very considerate of you," assured Lawson, looking at the three comets as if they were six.

It lent zip to the other's eagerness. The truck was forthcoming in double-quick time, rolled away before Ganne or Kasine or anyone else could intervene to question the propriety of letting the biped run loose. Its speed was high, its driver inclined to be garrulous.

"The Great Lord is a most exceptional person," he offered, hoping it might be repeated in his favor on the morrow. Privately he thought Markhamwit a pompous stinker. "We are most fortunate to have such a leader in these trying times."

"You could have one worse," agreed Lawson, blandly damning Markhamwit with faint praise.

The officer was too engrossed to notice it. "He will bring this war to a satisfactory end."

"I've not the slightest doubt of that," Lawson confirmed, nursing his own peculiar definition of what was satisfactory.

"I remember once—" The other broke off, brought the vehicle to an abrupt stop, scowled toward the side of the road. In a rasping voice he demanded of the new object of his attention, "Who gave you orders to stand there?"

"Nobody," admitted Yadiz, dolefully.

"Then why are you there?"

"He cannot be somewhere else," remarked Lawson.

The officer blinked, studied the windshield in complete silence for a while, then twisted to face his passenger.

"Why can't he?"

"Because wherever he happens to be *is* there. Obviously he cannot be where he isn't." Lawson sought confirmation of Yadiz. "Can you?"

"I don't know," said Yadiz, leery of this moot point and holding tightly to his gun. One thing he did know was that he had bandied words with this biped before.

Screwing up his eyes while he untangled some mental threads, the officer said to Lawson, "Now look, suppose that he was back by the ship, where would he be?"

"There," informal Lawson, devastatingly positive.

"But he would not be here?"

"Oh, certainly not."

"That's what I'm getting at," said the officer, much relieved to find that his brain really was hitting on all four. "I want to know why he is here."

"But he isn't," Lawson pointed out. "*We* are here." He nodded toward the side of the road. "He is *there*."

Something snapped for the other promptly abandoned all further discussion, flung open the truck's door with a resounding crash and snarled at Yadiz, "Get inside, you gaping idiot!"

Yadiz got in, handling his weapon as if it could bite him at both ends. The truck moved forward. For the remainder of the trip its driver hunched over the wheel, chewed steadily at his bottom lip and said not a word. Now and again his eyebrows knotted with the strain of thought as he made vain attempts to sort out the unsortable.

At the guard-ring the paunchy individual who had first consigned the arrival to the interrogation center watched the truck jerk to a stop and the trio get out. He came up frowning.

"So they have let him go?"

"Yes," said the driver, knowing no better.

"Whom did he see?"

"The Great Lord himself."

The other gave a little jump, viewed Lawson with embarrassed respect and took

some of the authority out of his tones.

"They didn't say what is to be done about these four casualties we've suffered?"

"Made no mention of them," the driver answered. "Maybe they—"

Lawson chipped in, "I'll tend to them. Where are they?"

"Over there." He indicated a dip to his left. "We couldn't shift them pending instructions."

"It wouldn't have mattered. They'd have recovered by this time tomorrow, anyway."

"It isn't fatal then?"

"Not at all," Lawson assured. "I'll go get them a shot of stuff that will bring them to life in two ticks."

He went toward the ship. The driver climbed moodily into his truck and headed back to town. Turning, the paunchy officer noticed Yadiz for the first time. Going up to him, he surveyed him slowly from top to bottom. Then again, in complete silence, from bottom to top.

Finally he barked, "From where have you come?"

"Nefersdinel," informed Yadiz, naming a straw-built kraal some twenty horizons away.

"Nefersdinel?" The officer was incredulous. "In the name of the seven suns, what were you doing there?"

"Being born," admitted Yadiz nervously. "And growing up."

"Fool!" he roared. "I want to know from what post you have wandered."

"The one next to Boonsnucker's," Yadiz told him very hurriedly.

The officer nursed his stomach with his lower hands and held his forehead with the upper ones. He seemed strangely distraught. Watching him, Yadiz conceived the notion that someone had blundered, but who or how was a complete mystery.

Regaining control of himself, the officer said with careful pronunciation, "I do not know a person named Boonsnucker. Neither do I desire the acquaintanceship of anyone bearing so repulsive a cognomen. Therefore it might be best if you showed me your post in clearly visible manner." He paused, glowering, then yelled at the top of his voice, "Point!"

Yadiz stuck out a startled arm.

"Go there," ordered the other in the same

enraged bellow. "And stay there!"

Yadiz went.

THE creature perched on the rim of the little controlroom's observation-port was the size of Lawson's fist. Long extinct Terran bees would have thought it a giant among their kind. Modern Callistrian ones might have regarded the Terran variety as backward pygmies had there been any real consciousness of Callistrianism or Terranism or any other form of planetary parochialism.

But at this far advanced stage of development of an entire solar system there had ceased to be an acute awareness of worldly origin, shape or species. A once essential datum in the environment had been discarded and no longer entered into the computations of anyone. The biped was not mentally biased by his own bipedal form; the insect not obsessed by its insectual condition. They knew themselves for what they were, namely, Solarians and two aspects of one colossal entity that had a thousand other facets elsewhere.

Indeed, the close-knit relationship between life-forms far apart in shape and size but sharing a titanic oneness in psyche had developed to the point where they could and did hold mental intercourse in a manner not truly telepathic. It was "self-thinking," the natural communion between parts of an enormous whole.

So Lawson had no difficulty in conversing with a creature that had no aural sense adequately attuned to the range of his voice, no tongue with which to speak. The communication came easier than any vocal method, was clear and accurate, left no room for linguistic or semantic booby-traps, no need to explain the meaning of meaning.

He flopped into the pilot's seat, gazed meditatively through the port and opined, "I'm not sanguine about them being reasonable."

"It does not matter," commented the other. "The end will be the same."

"True, Buzwuz, but unreasonableness means time and trouble."

"Time is endless; trouble another name for fun," declared Buzwuz, being profound. He employed his hind legs to clean the rear part of his velvet jacket.

Lawson said nothing. His attention shifted to a curiously three-dimensional picture fastened to the side wall. It depicted four bipeds, one of whom was a swart dwarf, also one dog wearing sun-glasses, six huge bees, a hawklike bird, a tusked monster vaguely resembling a prick-eared elephant, something else like a land-crab with long-fingered hands in lieu of claws, three peculiarly shapeless entities whose radiations had fogged part of the sensitive plate, and finally a spiderlike creature jauntily adorned with a feathered hat.

This characteristically Solarian bunch was facing the lens in the stiff, formal attitudes favored by a bygone age and so obviously were waiting for the birdie that they were unconsciously comical. He treasured this scene for its element of whimsy, also because there was immense significance in the amusing similarity of pose among creatures so manifestly unconscious of their differences. It was a picture of unity that is strength; unity born of a handful of planets and a double-handful of satellites circling a common sun.

Another bee-mind as insidious as part of his own came from somewhere outside the ship, saying, "Want us back yet?"

"No hurry."

"We're zooming around far beyond the city," it went on. "We've shown ourselves within reach of a few of them. They swiped at us without hesitation. And they meant it!" A pause, followed by, "They have instinctive fear of the unfamiliar. Reaction-time about one-tenth second. Choice of reaction: that which is swiftest rather than that which is most effective. Grade eight mentalities lacking unity other than that imposed upon them from above."

"I know." Lawson squirmed out of his seat as a heavy hammering sounded on the ship's shell somewhere near the airlock. "Don't go too far away, though. You may have to come back in a rush."

Going to the lock, he stood in its rim and looked down at a five-comet officer. The caller had an air of irateness tempered by apprehension. His eyes kept surveying the area above his head or straining to see past the biped's legs lest something else spring out to the attack.

"You're not supposed to be here," he

informed Lawson.

"Aren't I? Why not?"

"Nobody gave you permission to return."

"I don't need permission," Lawson told him.

"You cannot come back without it," the other contradicted.

Registering an expression of mock-bafflement, Lawson said, "Then how the deuce did I get here?"

"I don't know. Someone blundered. That's his worry and not mine."

"Well, what are you worrying about?" Lawson invited.

"I've just had a message from the city ordering me to check on whether you are actually here because, if so, you shouldn't be. You ought to be at the interrogation center."

"Doing what?"

"Awaiting their final decisions."

"But they aren't going to make any," said Lawson, with devastating positiveness. "It is we who will make the final ones."

The other didn't like the sound of that. He scowled, watched the sky, kept a wary eye on what little he could see of the ship's interior.

"I've been instructed to send you to the city at once."

"By whom?"

"Military headquarters."

"Tell them I'm not going before morning."

"You've got to go now," insisted the officer.

"All right. Invite your superiors at headquarters to come and fetch me."

"They can't do that."

"I'll say they can't!" agreed Lawson, with hearty emphasis.

This was even less to the visitor's taste. He said, "If you won't go voluntarily you'll have to be taken by force."

"Try it."

"My troops will receive orders to attack."

"That's all right with me. You go shoo them along. Orders are orders, aren't they?"

"Yes, but—"

"And," Lawson continued firmly, "it's the order-givers and not the order-carry-outers who'll get all the blame, isn't it?"

"The blame for what?" inquired the officer, very leerily.

"You'll find out!"

The other stewed it a bit. What would be found out, he decided, was anyone's guess, but his own estimate was that it could well be something mighty unpleasant. The biped's attitude amounted to a guarantee of that much.

There was a chance that the said unpleasantness might be of such a nature that injured feelings would be soothed by nothing less than disembowelment of a scapegoat. In that even a suitable candidate would have to be found. His mind swiftly concocted half a dozen short lists of names upon whom the big brass could vent their spleen. The lists had one most disturbing feature: each bore his own name right at the top.

"I think I'll get in touch again, tell them you refuse to leave this vessel and ask for further instructions," he decided, rather lamely.

"That's the boy," indorsed Lawson, showing hearty approval. "You look after yourself and yourself will look after you."

"Eh?"

"Always remember that me is the best friend of I."

"I know neither of those individuals," said the officer, doing some mental fumbling around.

"Then you shouldn't let them get into your bed," Lawson reproved in highly moral tones. Bestowing a look of condemnation, he left the lock and went back to the pilot's room.

VII

THE Great Lord Markhamwit paced up and down the room in the restless manner of one burdened by an unsolvable problem. Every now and again he made a vicious slap at his harness, a sure sign that he was considerably exercised in mind and that his liver was feeling the strain.

"Well," he snapped at Minister Ganne, "have *you* been able to devise a satisfactory way out?"

"No, my lord," admitted Ganne, ruefully.

"Doubtless you retired and enjoyed a good night's sleep without giving it another thought?"

"Indeed, no, I—"

"Never mind the lies. I am well aware that everything is left to me." Going to his

desk he employed its plug and tube, asked, "Has the biped started out yet?" Getting a response, he resumed his pacing. "At last he condescends to come and see me. He will be here in half a time-unit."

"He refused to return yesterday," remarked Ganne, treating disobedience as something completely outside all experience. "He viewed all threats with open disdain and practically invited us to attack his ship."

"I know, I know." Markhamwit dismissed it with an irritated wave of the hand. "If he is a bare-faced bluffer it can be said to his credit that he is a perfect one. There is the real source of all the trouble."

"In what way, my lord?"

"Look, we are a powerful life-form, so much so that after we have defeated the Nileans we shall be complete masters of our entire galaxy. Our resources are great, our resourcefulness equally great. We are highly scientific. We have spaceships and formidable weapons of war. To all intents and purposes we have conquered the elements and bent them to our will. That makes us strong, does it not?"

"Yes, my lord, very strong."

"It also makes us weak," growled Markhamwit. "This problem dumped in our laps proves that we are weak in one respect, namely, we have become so conditioned in dealing with concrete things that we don't know how to cope with intangibles. We match rival ships with better ships, enemy guns with bigger guns. But we are stalled immediately a foe abandons all recognized methods of warfare and resorts to what may be no more than a piece of sheer, unparalleled impudence."

"Surely there must be some positive way of checking the truth and—"

"I can think of fifty ways." Markhamwit ceased his trudging and glared at Ganne as if that worthy were personally responsible for the predicament. "And the beauty of them all is that not one is genuinely workable."

"No, my lord?"

"No! We could check on whether Solarians actually do exist in the next galaxy if our ships could get there, which they can't. And neither can any other ship, according to Yielm. We could make direct contact with the Nileans, call off the war and

arrange mutual action against Solarian interlopers, but if the whole affair is a Nilean trick they will continue to deceive us to our ultimate downfall. Or we could seize this biped, strap him to an operating table and cut the truth out of him with a scalpel."

"That ought to be the best way," ventured Ganne, seeing nothing against it.

"Undoubtedly, if his story is a lot of bluff. But what if it is not?"

"Ah!" said Ganne, feeling for an itch and pinching deep into his hide.

"The whole position is fantastic," declared Markhamwit. "This two-armed creature comes here without any weapons identifiable as such. Not a gun, not a bomb, not a ray-projector. So far as we know there isn't so much as a bow and arrow on his boat. His kind have killed nobody, injured nobody, shed not a drop of blood either now or in our past, yet he claims powers of a kind we hesitate to test."

"DO YOU suppose that we are already sterilized and therefore doomed, like the Elmones?" Ganne asked, plainly uneasy.

"No, certainly not. If he had done such a thing he would have blasted off during the night because there would be no point in dickering with us any longer."

"Yes, that's true." Ganne felt vastly relieved without knowing why. It would be no hairs out of his hide if posterity failed to appear. In another fifty years' time there would be none left of his own generation to care who bossed which galaxies. That was the great beauty of being dead: one could then be so splendidly indifferent to matters that agitated the living. There were occasions then Ganne relished a morbid viewpoint.

Markhamwit continued, "Anyway, he's said nothing whatever about such methods of dealing with us. We know of them only fictionally, as part of the Solarian Myth. The sole threats he has made are that if we destroy him we shall then have to cope with those winged creatures who will remain here to outbreed us, and that if by some means we succeed in destroying them also, we shall still have to face whatever the Combine may bring against us later on. I cannot imagine the true nature of that particular menace

except that by our standards it will be unorthodox."

"Their methods may represent the normal ways of warfare in their own galaxy," Ganne pointed out. "Perhaps they never got around to inventing guns and high explosives."

"Or perhaps they discarded them a million years ago in favor of techniques less costly and more effective." Markhamwit cast an impatient glance at the time recorder whirring on the wall. "Trickery or not, I have learned a valuable lesson from this incident. I have learned that tactics are more important than instruments, wits are better than warheads. If we had used our brains a bit more we might have persuaded the Nileans to knock themselves out and save us a lot of bother. All that was needed was a completely original approach."

"Yes, my lord," agreed Ganne, privately praying that he would not be commanded to suggest one or two original approaches.

"What I want to know," Markhamwit went on, bitterly, "and what I must know is whether the Nileans have thought of it first and are egging us on to knock ourselves out. So when this self-professed Solarian arrives I'm going to—"

He ceased as a knock sounded, the door opened and the captain of the guard showed himself, bowing low.

"My lord, the alien is here."

"Show him in."

Plumping heavily into a chair, Markhamwit tapped restless fingers on four arm rests and glowered at the door.

ENTERING blithely, Lawson took a seat, smiled at the waiting pair and asked, "Well, does civilization come to these parts or not?"

It riled the Great Lord, but he ignored the question, controlled his temper and said heavily, "Yesterday you returned to your vessel contrary to my wishes."

"Today your warships are still messing around in free space contrary to ours." Lawson heaved a sigh of resignation. "If wishes were fishes we'd never want for food."

"You appear to forget," informed Markhamwit, "that in this part of the cosmos it is my desires that are fulfilled and not yours!"

"But you've just complained about yours being ignored," remarked Lawson, pretending surprise.

Markhamwit licked sharp teeth. "It won't happen again. Certain individuals made the mistake of letting you go unopposed, without question. They will pay for that. We have a way with fools."

"So have we!"

"That is something of which I require proof. You are going to provide it." His voice had an authoritative note. "And what is more, you are going to provide it in the way I direct, to my complete satisfaction."

"How?" inquired Lawson.

"By bringing the Nilean high command here to discuss this matter face to face."

"They won't come."

"I guessed you'd say that. It was such a certainty that I could have said it for you." Markhamwit displayed satisfaction with his own foresight. "They've thought up an impudent bluff. Now they're called upon to support it in person by chancing their precious hides. That is too much. That is taking things too far. So they won't do it." He threw a glance at Minister Ganne. "What did I tell you?"

"I don't see how the Nileans or anyone else can bolster a non-existent trick," offered Lawson, mildly.

"They could appear before me to argue the problem. That would be convincing so far as I'm concerned."

"Precisely!"

Markhamwit frowned. "What d'you mean, precisely?"

"If it's a stunt of their own contriving why shouldn't they back it to the limit and risk a few lives on it? The war is on and they've got to suffer casualties anyway. If they can dig up volunteers for one dangerous mission they can find them for another."

"So?"

"But they won't gamble one life on a set-up they suspect to be of your making. There's no percentage in it."

"It is not of my making. You know that."

"The Nileans don't," said Lawson.

"You claim to have another ship on their world. What's it there for if not to persuade them?"

"You're getting your ideas mixed."

"Am I?" Markhamwit's grip was tight

on the arms of his chair. He'd almost had enough of this biped. "In what way?"

"The vessel is there solely to tell the Nileans to cease cluttering the space lanes—or else! We're not interested in your meetings, discussions or wars. You can kiss and be friends or fight to the death and it makes not the slightest difference to us one way or the other. All that we're concerned about is that space remains free, preferably by negotiation and mutual agreement. If not, by compulsion."

"Compulsion?" snapped Markhamwit. "I would give a great deal to learn exactly how much power your kind really does possess. Perhaps little more than iron nerves and wagging tongues."

"Perhaps," admitted Lawson, irritatingly indifferent.

"I'll tell you something you don't know." Markhamwit leaned forward, staring at him. "Our first, second, third and fourth battle fleets have dispersed. Temporarily I've taken them out of the war. It's a risk, but worth it."

"Doesn't alter the situation if they're still chasing around here, there and everywhere."

"On the contrary it may alter the situation very considerably if we have a fair measure of luck," contradicted Markhamwit, watching him closely. "They have been redirected into a colossal hunt. I now have a total of seventeen thousand vessels scouting all cosmic sectors recently settled or explored by Nileans. Know what they're looking for?"

"I can guess."

"They're seeking a minor, unimportant, previously unnoticed planet populated by pink-skinned bipeds with hard faces and gabby mouths. If they find it"—he swept an arm in a wide, expressive arc—"we'll blow them clean out of existence and the Solarian Myth along with them."

"How nice."

"We shall also deal with you in suitable manner. And we'll settle with the Nileans once and for all."

"Dear me," offered Lawson, meditatively. "Do you really expect us to sit around for ever while you play hunt the slipper?"

For the nineteenth time thwarted by the other's appalling nonchalance, Markhamwit lay back without replying. For a

wild moment he toyed with the notion that perhaps the Nileans were infinitely more ingenious than he'd first supposed and were taking him for a sucker by manning their ship with remotely controlled robots. That would account for this biped's unnatural impassivity. If he were nothing more than the terminal instrument of some highly complicated array of electronic apparatus operated by Nilean science from afar, it would account for his attitude. A talking-machine has no emotions.

But it just wasn't possible. Months ago, before the war started, a radio-beamed message to the nearest fringe of Nilean's petty empire had to be relayed from planet to planet, system to system, took a long time to get there, an equally long time for a reply to come back. It was completely beyond the power of any science, real or imaginary, so to control an automaton across many light years that it could respond conversationally with no time lag whatsoever.

Lawson, he decided uneasily, was robotic in some ways but definitely not a robot. Rather was he a life-form possessed of real individuality plus a queer something else impossible to describe. A creature to whom an unknown quantity or quality has been added and therefore unlike anything formerly encountered.

Emerging from his meditations, he growled, "You'll sit around because you'll have no choice about the matter. I have ordered that you be detained pending my further decisions."

"That doesn't answer my question," Lawson pointed out.

"Why doesn't it?"

"I asked whether you expect *us* to sit around. What you see fit to do with this portion can have no effect upon the remainder."

"This portion," echoed Markhamwit, his air that of one not sure whether he has heard aright. "I have got *all* of you!" He pressed a stud on his desk.

Lawson stood up as the guards came in, smiled thinly and said, "I can tell you a fable of the future. There was once an idiot who picked a grain of sand from a mountain, cupped it in the palm of his hand and said, 'Look, I am holding a mountain!'"

"Take him away," bawled Markhamwit

at the escort. "Keep him behind bars until I want him again."

Watching them file out, and the door close, he fumed a bit. "Creating cockeyed problems for others is a game at which two can play. In this existence one has to use one's wits."

"Undoubtedly, my lord," indorsed Minister Ganne, dutifully admiring him.

"So if the Nileans are behind this set-up they'll now have to jump a thousand places at once. If they are not, and if there really are Solarians, I've faced them with the fact that I've not reacted as the Elmones are said to have done. I've not slaughtered their emissary. I've not withdrawn my warships from space but neither have I refused to do so—yet! They can chew on that for a while."

"Yes, my lord."

"But he called me an idiot," added Markhamwit, displaying imperial ire.

"Of course, my lord," said Ganne, absent-mindedly.

Markhamwit turned on him and roared, "What do you mean, of course?"

His bowels going weak, Ganne pleaded in desperation, "I thought you said, 'I call him an idiot.' So I agreed as that was also my impression."

"Hah! You seek to escape by transferring the blame from your tongue to your ears." Markhamwit studied him with unconcealed suspicion. "Someday, Ganne, you will escape everything by transferring your neck to a noose."

Mournfully self-conscious, Ganne said nothing, busily occupied himself pursuing three simultaneous itches.

VIII

JAMES LAWSON carefully surveyed his cell. Large and fairly comfortable, with a queer-shaped bed, a thick, straw-stuffed mattress, the inevitable four-armed chair, a long, narrow table. A generous basket of fruit stood on the middle of the latter, also some brownish objects resembling wholemeal cakes.

He was as amused by the sight of the food as he had been by the rough courtesy with which the guard had conducted him here. Evidently Markhamwit had been specific in his instructions. Put him in the

jug. Don't harm him, don't starve him, but put him in the jug.

Markhamwit wanted it both coming and going. The Great Lord was establishing a claim to kindness as a form of insurance against whatever might befall while, at the same time, keeping the victim just where he wanted him until thoroughly satisfied that nothing dreadful could or would befall.

There was a small barred window twenty feet up, more for ventilation than for light. The only other opening was the big grille across the entrance. A guard sat on a stool the other side of the bars boredly reading a narrow but thick cylindrical scroll which he unwound slowly as his gaze followed the print down.

Tilting back in the chair and resting his heels on the end rim of the bed, Lawson had a look at his ship. This was fully as easy as staring at the blank walls of the cell. All that was necessary was to readjust his mind and look through other eyes elsewhere. It can be done, indeed it becomes second nature when the mind behind the other eyes is to all intents and purposes a part of one's own.

He got a multiple picture because he was looking through multiple lenses, but he was accustomed to that. Meeting and knowing other shapes and forms is as nothing compared with the experience of actually sharing them, even those employing organs stranger than eyes.

The ship was resting exactly as he'd left it. Its lock still stood wide open but nobody was entering or attempting to do so. The guards maintained their ring, watched the vessel in the perfunctory manner of those already sick of the sight of it. He could see Yadiz mooning dolefully behind a rock and Boonsnucker squatting in his hole.

As he studied the scene the swiftly moving eyes swung low, dived toward an officer who loomed enormously with sheer closeness. The officer made a wild swipe at the eyes with a short sword curved two ways like a double sickle. Involuntarily Lawson blinked, for it came like a slash at his own head. His neck went taut as the shining blade whistled through the space occupied by his gullet had he been there in person.

"Someday, Lou," he thought, "I'll do as much for you. I'll give you a horrible nightmare."

The bee-mind came back. "Ever looked through somebody landbound, trying to escape danger on legs and without wings? That is a nightmare!" A pause as what could be seen through his optics showed him to be zooming skyward. "Want out yet?"

"No hurry," Lawson answered.

Withdrawing from that individual he re-angled his mind and let it reach outward, tremendously outward. This, too, was relatively easy. The velocity of light is sluggish, creeping when compared with near-instantaneous contact between mental components of a psychic whole. Thought is energy, light is energy, matter is energy, but the greatest of these is thought.

Some day his enormously advanced multi-kind might prove a thesis long evolved: that energy, light and matter are creations of super-thought. They were getting mightily near to it already: just one or perhaps two more steps to godhood when they'd have finally established the mastery of mind over matter by using the former to create the latter according to their needs.

So there was no time lag in his reaching for the central world of Nilea, nor would there have been one of any handicapping duration had he reached across the galaxy and over the gulf into the next. He merely thought "at" his objective and was there, seeing through eyes exactly like his own at the interior of a ship exactly like his own except in one respect: it harbored no big bees.

This other vessel's crew consisted of one biped named Edward Reeder and four of those fuzzy, shapeless entities who had fogged his souvenir picture. A quartet of Rheans, these, from a moon of the ringed planet. Rheans in name only; Solarians in long-established fact.

Callistrian bees wouldn't be of much avail in coping with Nileans who were likely to hang around inviting hearty stings for the sheer pleasure of resulting intoxication. Their peculiar make-up enabled them to get roaring drunk on any acid other than hydrofluoric, and even that corrosive stuff was viewed as a liquid substitute for scout berries.

But the Nileans were south-eyed, scanning a band of the spectrum that ran well into the ultra violet. And one has to be

decidedly north-eyed to see a Rhean with real clarity. So far as local life-forms were concerned this Solarian vessel was crewed by one impertinent biped and several near-ghosts. Like most creatures suffering optical limitations, the Nileans suspected, disliked—aye, feared—living things never more than half visible.

It might have been the same with other Solarians in their attitude toward peculiar fellows from a moon of the ringed planet but for one thing: that which cannot be examined visually can be appreciated and understood mentally. The collective Rhean mind was as much intimate part of the greater Solarian mass-mentality as was any other part. The bipeds and the bees had phantom brothers.

REEDER was thinking "at" him, "I've just returned from the third successive interview with their War Board, which is bossed by a hairy bully named Glastrom. He's completely obsessed by the notion that your Markhamwit is trying to outsmart him."

"Similar reaction at this end. I've been stuck in clink while Markhamwit waits for destiny to intervene in his favor."

"They've come near trying the same tactic with me," informed Reeder's mind, showing strange disinterest in whether or not the other was being made to suffer during his incarceration. "Chief item that has made them hesitate is the problem of what to do about the rest of us." His gaze shifted a moment to the shadowy, shapeless quartet posing nearby. "The boys put over a mild demonstration of what can be done by wraiths with the fidgets. They switched off the city's light and power and so forth while crosseyed guards fired at the minor moon. The Nileans didn't like it."

"Can't say they're overfond of our crowd here, either." Lawson paused thoughtfully, went on, "Chronic distrust on both sides is preventing conformity with our demands and seems likely to go on doing so until the crack of doom. Markhamwit is in a mental jam and his only solution is to play for time."

"Same way with Glastrom and the War Board."

"Limit their time," interjected four

laconic but penetrating thought-forms from the shapeless ones.

"Limit their time," simultaneously indorsed several bee-minds from a source much nearer.

"Give them one time-unit," confirmed a small and varied number of entities scattered through the galaxy.

"Give them one time-unit," decided an enormous composite mentality far across the gulf.

"Better warn them right away." Reeder's eyes showed him to be making for the open lock. His mind held no thought of personal peril that might arise from this ultimatum. He was as ageless as that of which he was part, and as deathless because, whether whole or destroyed, he was part of that which can never die. Like Lawson, he was man plus men plus other creatures. The first might disappear into eternal nothingness, but the plus-quantities remained for ever and ever and ever.

For the same reasons Lawson followed the same course in much the same way. The intangible thread of his thought-stream snapped back from faraway places and the eyes he now looked through were entirely his own. Taking his heels off the bed, he stood up, yawned, stretched himself, went to the grille.

"I've got to speak to Markhamwit at once."

PUTTING down the scroll, the guard registered the disillusioned expression of one who hopes everlastingly for peace and invariably hopes in vain.

"The Great Lord will send for you in due course," he informed. "Meanwhile you could rest and have a sleep."

"I do not sleep."

"Everybody sleeps sometimes or other," asserted the guard, unconsciously dogmatic. "They have to."

"Speak for yourself," advised Lawson. "I've never slept in my life and don't intend to start now."

"Even the Great Lord sleeps," mentioned the guard with the air of one producing incontrovertible evidence.

"You're telling me?" Lawson inquired.

The other gaped at him, sniffed around as if seeking the odor of a dimly suspected

insult. "My orders are to keep watch upon you until the Great Lord wishes to see you again."

"Well, then, ask him if he so wishes."

"I dare not."

"All right, ask someone who does dare."

It got the guard in a fix. He did not want to do anything about this matter, neither did he wish to reveal his lack of desire. He foresaw trouble if he did take the required action, trouble if he didn't. So he picked up the scroll, stared at it uncertainly, put it down, fumbled with his top pair of hands, then with the lower ones, and mentally consigned this alien nuisance to the farthest, biggest and hottest star in the galaxy.

"Won't it keep until tomorrow?"

"You know quite well that the Great Lord's business will never keep until tomorrow," reproved Lawson. "It is urgent, important and takes precedence over everything else."

"I'll call the captain of the guard," decided the other with sudden alacrity.

He went along the passage, came back in short time with a larger and surlier specimen who glowered at the prisoner and demanded, "Now, what's all this rubbish?"

Eyeing him with exaggerated incredulity, Lawson said, "Do you really dare to define the Great Lord's personal affairs as rubbish?"

The captain's pomposity promptly hissed out of him like gas from a pricked balloon. He appeared to shrink in size and went two shades paler in the face. The guard edged away from him like one fearful of being contaminated by open sedition.

"I did not mean it that way."

"I sincerely hope not," declared Lawson, displaying impressive piety.

Recovering with an effort, the captain asked, "About what do you want to speak to the Great Lord?"

"I'll tell you after you've shown me your certificate."

"Certificate?" The captain was mystified. "Which certificate?"

"The document proving that you have been appointed the censor of the Great Lord's conversations."

The captain said hurriedly, "I will go and consult the garrison commander."

He went away with the pained expression

of one who has put his foot in it and must find somewhere to scrape it off. The guard resumed his seat on the stool, mooned at Lawson, killed a cootie.

"I'll give him a hundred milliparts," Lawson remarked. "If he's not back by then, I'm coming out."

The guard stood up, hand on gun, face showing alarm. "You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"You are locked in."

"Hah!" said Lawson as if enjoying a secret joke.

"Besides; I am here."

"That's unfortunate for you," Lawson sympathized. "Either you'll shoot me or you won't. If you don't, I'll walk away and Markhamwit will be most annoyed. If you do, I'll be dead and he'll be infuriated." He shook his head slowly. "Tsk-tsk! I would not care to be you!"

His alarm amounting to a near-unbearable point, the guard tried to watch the grille and the end of the passage at the same time. His relief was intense when the captain reappeared and ordered him to unlock.

The officer said to Lawson, "The commander passed on your request. You will be permitted to talk over the line to Minister Ganne. The rest is up to him."

Leading the way, with the guard in the rear, he conducted the prisoner to a small office, signed to a plug and tube. Taking them up, Lawson held the plug to his ear, it being too big to fit in the locally accepted manner. At the same time his mind sent out a soundless call shipwards.

"This is as good a time as any."

Then he listened to the plug and heard Ganne saying, "What you want to tell the Great Lord can be told to me."

"Pass him the news that he's got seven-eighths of a time-unit," Lawson suggested. "They've wasted the other eighth at this end."

Out one corner of his eye he noted the listening captain registering surly displeasure. His gaze lifted, observed that the door and two windows were half open. Lou, Buzwuz and the others would have no trouble, no trouble at all.

"He's got seven-eighths of a time-unit?" echoed Ganne, his voice rising a fraction. "To do what?"

"Beam his orders for recall."
"Recall?"

LAWSON said with tired patience, "You're only wasting valuable moments repeating the end of each sentence. You know what I meant. You were there all the time, listening to our talk. You're not hard of hearing, are you?"

Ganne snapped, "I'll stand for no gross impertinence from you. I want to know precisely what you mean by saying that the Great Lord has seven-eighths of a time-unit."

"It's more like thirteen-sixteenths now. He has got to take action by then."

"Has he?" sneered Ganne. "Well, suppose he doesn't?"

"We'll take it."

"That comes well from you. You're in no—" His voice broke off as another one sounded authoritatively in the background. More dimly he could be heard saying, "Yes, my lord. It's the biped, my lord."

Behind him in the little office Lawson could also hear something else: a low drone coming nearer, nearer, through the door, through the window. There were exclamations from the other pair, a few scuffling, jumping noises, two thin yelps, two dull thumps and silence.

Markhamwit came on the line, spoke in harsh tones. "If you hope to precipitate the issue by further bluff, you are very much mistaken." Then with added menace, "Reports from my fleets have now started to come in. Sooner or later I'll get the one for which I am waiting. I shall then deal with you rather drastically."

"You've now got approximately three-quarters of a time-unit," Lawson gave back. "At the end of that period we shall take the initiative, do whatever we consider to be for the best. It won't be drastic because we shed no blood, take no lives. All the same, it will be quite effective."

"Will it?" Markhamwit emitted sardonic chuckles. "In that case I will do part of that which you require of me. In other words, I will institute action at the exact moment you have nominated. But it will be the action I deem best fitted to the circumstances."

"Time's marching on," remarked Law-

son. The drone had left the room but could still be heard faintly from somewhere outside. He could see the soles of a pair of recumbent jackboots lying near his own feet.

"You cannot get to your ship, neither can you communicate with it," Markhamwit went on, highly pleased with the situation. "And in precisely three-quarters of a time-unit there will be no ship to which you can return. The aerial patrol will have blasted it clean out of existence while it sits there, a steady target that cannot be missed."

"Can't it?"

"The sterilizing apparatus, if there is one, will be vaporized with it before it can be brought into action. Any winged things left flying around will be wiped out one by one as and when opportunity occurs. Since you've seen fit to push this matter to a sudden conclusion I am prepared to take a chance on anything the Solarian Combine may do." Finally, with sarcasm, "If there is a Solarian Combine and if it can do anything worth a moment's worry."

He must have flung down the plug and tube at his end, for his voice went less distinct as he said to Ganne, "Get Yielm for me. I'm going to show those Nileans that hoodwinking is a poor substitute for bombs and bullets."

Dumping his own end of the line, Lawson turned, stepped over two bodies unable to do more than curse him with their eyes. Going outside, he found himself in a large yard.

He crossed this diagonally under the direct gaze of half a dozen guards patrolling the wall top. Curiosity was their only reason for watching him, the interesting spectacle of a life-form not listed among the many with which they were familiar. It was his manifest confidence that fooled them, his unmistakable air of having every right to be going wherever he was going. Nobody thought to question it, not a momentary notion of escape crossed their minds.

Indeed, one of them obliged by operating the lever that opened the end gate, and lived to damn the day when he permitted himself to be misled by appearances. Not to be outdone, another whistled a passing truck which stopped for the fugitive. And the driver, too, found later reason to deplore the pick-up.

LAWSON said to the driver, "Can you take me to that ship on the plain?"

"I'm not going that far."

"It's a matter of major importance. I've just been speaking to Minister Ganne about it."

"Oh, what did he say?"

"He put me on to the Great Lord who told me I've got little more than half a time-unit to spare."

"The Great Lord," breathed the other, with becoming reverence. He revved up, sent the truck racing onward. "I'll get you there in plenty of time." He twisted the wheel, cut around a dilapidated vehicle bearing a pair of four-comet officers who seemed to resent being overtaken by anything. "This war teaches you to put a move on."

"It does," agreed Lawson, bracing his feet against the floorboards. There was a loud blare from behind and he asked, "What's that?"

The driver had a look by craning his neck out the door, there being no rear view mirror. For a moment the truck zig-zagged as if tempted to ditch itself.

"Those two officers. They want to get ahead of us again."

"So what?"

"I ought to let them."

"Why?"

"High rank takes precedence when it wishes."

"Not over the Great Lord's own interests, surely?" said Lawson, amazed.

"No, you bet not!" The driver firmed his jaw, zipped the pace up. The horn behind at once gave out an infuriated howl which persisted for quite a time but gradually faded with distance. The driver appeared to be experiencing an inward enjoyment that he did not choose to express in words.

There was no need to burst through the guard-ring; it no longer existed. Troops had been withdrawn to a safe distance, assembled in a solid bunch, and were leaning on their arms like an audience awaiting a rare spectacle. A couple of officers danced and gestured as the truck swept alongside the ship, but they were far off, well beyond calling distance, and the driver failed to notice them.

"Thanks!" Lawson tumbled out of the

cab. "One good turn deserves another, so I'm telling you to get out faster than you came."

The other blinked at him. "Why?"

"Because in about one-fifth of a time-unit a dollop of bombs will land right here. You'll make it with plenty to spare provided you don't sit there gaping."

Though puzzled and incredulous, the driver saw clearly that this was a poor time to probe further into the matter. Taking the offered advice, he got out fast, his vehicle rocking with sheer speed.

Lawson entered the lock, closed it behind him. He did not bother to inquire whether all his crew were aboard. He knew that they were there in the same way that they had known of his impending return and intended take-off.

Dumping himself into the pilot's seat he fingered the controls, eyed the ship's chronometer thoughtfully. He'd got just seventy-two milliparts in which to beat the big bang. So he shifted a tiny lever one notch and went out from under.

The vacuum created by the vessel's departure sucked most of the troops' hats from their heads, snatched away the gun on which Boonsnucker was propped and compelled him to prostrate himself in the dirt. Yadz was luckier. He merely bent before the violent wind and busted the most embarrassing section of his harness.

High above, the aerial patrol swooped and swirled, held on to its missiles and sought in vain for the target.

IX

THE world was a wanderer, a planet torn loose from its parent sun by some catastrophe far back in the tremendous past. At an equally distant time in the future it would be captured by some other star and either join the new family or be destroyed. Meanwhile it curved aimlessly through space, orphan of a bygone storm.

It wasn't cold, it wasn't dark. Internal fires kept it warm. Eternal stars limned it in pale, ethereal light. It had tiny, pastel-shaded flowers and thin, delicate trees that pushed their feet toward the warmth and kept their faces to the stars. It also held sentient life, though not of its own creation.

There were fourteen ships on this uncharted sphere. Eleven were Solarian. One was Nilean. Two belonged to the Great Lord Markhamwit. The Solarian vessels were grouped together in a gentle valley in one hemisphere. The remainder were on the opposite side of the planet, the Nileans separated from their foes by a couple of hundred miles, each combatant unaware of the other's existence.

The situation of these last two groups was a curious one. Each of their three ships had detected the gypsy-sphere at times a few days apart and landed upon it in the hope of discovering bipeds or, at least, gaining some clue to their whereabouts. Each crew had promptly suffered an attack of mental aberration verging upon craziness, exploded the armory, wrecked the vessel and thus marooned themselves. Each crew now sat around stupefied by their own idiocy and thoroughly convinced that not another space-ship existed within a billion miles.

The secret of this state of affairs reposed with two of the eleven Solarian vessels. These had on board a number of homarachnids, spiderish quasi-humans from a place unknown to the galaxy, a hot, moist world called Venus. It happened that this world circled around an equally unknown sun called Sol. Which meant that the homarachnids were Solarians along with the bipeds and bees and semivisible fuzzies.

From the purely military viewpoint there was nothing redoubtable about homarachnids. They were unsoldierly, knew nothing of weapons and cared nothing either. They were singularly lacking in technical skills, viewed even a screwdriver as a cumbersome, patience-straining device. Outwardly, their most noticeable feature was an incurable penchant for wearing the most incongruous feathered hats that the milliners of Venus could devise. In some respects they were the most childlike of the Solarian medley. In one way they were the most deeply to be feared, for they had refractive minds.

With the absolute ease of those to whom it comes naturally any homarachnid could concentrate the great Solarian mass-mentality, projecting it and focusing it where required. The burning point of an immense magnifying glass was as nothing to the effect caused when a non-Solarian mind became

the focal point of an attentive homarachnid's brain. The result was temporary but absolute mental mastery.

It *had* to be temporary. The Solarian ethic denied the right to bring any mind into permanent subjection, for that would amount to slavery of the soul. But for this, any pair of homarachnids could have compelled antagonistic warlords to "see reason" in a mere couple of milliparts. But mentally imposed agreement is worth nothing if it disappears the moment the cause is removed. The final aim must be to persuade Markhamwit and Glastrom to cooperate from motives of expediency and for keeps. The same ethic insisted that this goal be reached without spilling of life fluids if possible, or else at cost of blood only to the high and mighty.

Nobody knew better than Solarians that wars are not caused, declared or willingly fought by nations, planetary peoples or shape-groups, for these consist in the main of plain, ordinary folk who crave nothing more than to be left alone. The real culprits are power-drunken cliques of near-manics who by dint of one means or another have coerced the rest. These were the ones to provide the blood if any was going to be shed at all.

Lawson and Reeder and the rest knew the operations of the Solarian mass-mind as well as they knew their own, for it was composed in part of their own. They were sharers in an intellectual common property. Therefore no issuing of detailed orders was necessary to get them to do whatever might be needed. Decisions reached them in identically the same form as if thought out by their independent selves.

As others had found to their cost and would do so again and again, the Solarians had an immense advantage in being able to give highly organized battle without benefit of complicated signalling and communications systems. So far as Solarians were concerned, lack of such antiquated technical adjuncts was lack of something susceptible to error, something to go wrong. There would be no mistaken charge of a light brigade in their history.

Lawson's ship was one of the assembled eleven. Reeder's was another. Seven more had come in from lonelier parts of the

galaxy for the same purpose: to rendezvous with the remaining two and add a few homarachnids to their crews. Had the enemy been of different nature they might have been reinforced by a different shape, perhaps elephantine creatures from Europa or dark dwarfs from Mars. The physical instruments were chosen to suit the particular task, and the hat-models of Venus would do fine for this one.

TWO of them, gray-skinned and bristly-haired of body, six-legged and with compound eyes, scuttled aboard Lawson's vessel, sniffed suspiciously through organs that were not noses, looked at one another.

"I smell bugs," announced the one adorned with a purple toque around which a fluffy plume was tastefully coiled.

"This can needs delousing," agreed the other who wore a glaring red fez with a long, thin crimson ribbon protruding vertically from its top.

"If you prefer," offered Lawson, "you can go on Reeder's boat."

"What, with that gang of spooks?" He cocked the toque sidewise. "I'd sooner suffer the bugs."

"Me too," agreed Red Fez.

"That is most sociable of you," sneered the mind-form of Buzwuz, chipping in suddenly. He zoomed out of the navigation-room and into the passage, an orange ball on flashing wings. "I think we can manage to—" He broke off as he caught sight of the arrivals, let out a mental screech of agony, whirled round in circles. "Oh, look at them! Just *look!*"

"What's the matter?" aggressively demanded he in the purple toque whose name this year was Nfam. Next year it would be Nfim. And the year after, Nfom.

"The vile headgear," complained Buzwuz, shuddering visibly. "Especially that red thing."

Th owner of the fez, whose current name was Jlath, waxed indignant. "I'd have you know this is an original creation by the famous Oroni and—"

"O'Rooney must be nuts," declared Buzwuz, without any doubt whatsoever.

"I said Oroni," corrected Jlath severely. "He's far and away the greatest—"

1—PLANET—January

Frowning at all and sundry, Lawson interrupted, "When you mutual monstrosities have finished swapping compliments maybe you'll make ready for take-off. The fact that we're inertialess doesn't mean you can clutter up the passage." He slammed the door of the lock, fastened it, went to the pilot's cabin and moved the little lever.

That left ten ships. Reeder's departed soon afterward. Then the others, one by one. And that left nothing but three ruined cylinders and three ruminative crews unable to do anything but mourn their own inexplicable madness.

X

FIRST contact was one of the Great Lord's heavy battle cruisers, a long, black cylinder well-armed with large caliber guns and remotely controlled torpedoes. It was heading at fast pace for Kalambar, a blue-white sun with a small system of planets located on the rim of what the Nileans regarded as their sphere of interest. Those aboard it had in mind that the Kalambar group was believed to be habitable but little else was known about it, therefore it was a likely hiding-place of Nilean allies, two-legged or winged.

Lawson knew of this cruiser's existence and intent long before it loomed large enough to obscure a noticeable portion of the starfield and even before sensitive detectors started clicking to mark the presence of something metallic, swift-moving and emitting heat. He knew of it simply because the exotically-hatted pair probed forth as twin channels of a faraway supermind, had no difficulty in picking up the foe's group-thoughts or determining the direction, course and distance of the source. All he had to do was take the ship where they indicated, knowing in precise detail what he'd find when he got there.

Even at the tremendous velocities commonplace only to another galaxy the catching-up took time. But they made it in due course, burst out of the starfield with such suddenness that they were bulleting at equal pace and on parallel course before the other's alarm system had time to give warning.

By the time the bells did set up their

clamor it was too late. With remarkable unanimity the crew had conceived several strange notions and were unable to sense the strangeness simply because all were thinking alike. Firstly, the alarm was about to sound and that must be the signal for action. Secondly, it was sheer waste of precious lifetime to mess around in empty space when one could put in some real existence on good, solid earth. Thirdly, there was a suitable haven shining through the dark four points to starboard and much nearer than Kalambar. Fourthly, to place the ship completely out of action on landing would be the most certain way of ensuring a long period of rest and relaxation.

These ideas ran contrary to their military conditioning, were directly opposed to duty and discipline, but they accorded with inward instincts, secret desires, and moreover were imposed with suggestive power too great to resist.

So the alarm system duly operated and the battle cruiser at once turned four points to starboard. With the Solarian boat following unheeded it sped straight for the adjacent system, made its landing on a world owned by backward, neutral and embarrassed Dirkins who were greatly relieved when a loud bang marked the vessel's disabling and its crew proceeded to lounge around like beachcombers. Only thing the Dirkins could not understand was why this party of intended lotus-eaters suddenly became afflicted with vain regrets coincidentally with the disappearance of that second ship from the sky.

In short order twenty-seven more vessels went the same way, turning off route, dumping themselves on the nearest habitable sphere and sabotaging themselves clean out of the war. Seventeen of these belonged to the Great Lord Markhamwit; ten to the Nileans. Not one resisted. Not one fired a gun, launched a torpedo or so much as took evasive action. The partway products of science are pitifully ineffectual when suddenly confronted with the superb end-product, namely, superiority of the brain over all material things.

NEVERTHELESS, ancient ingenuity did try to strike a telling blow at the ultra-modern when Lawson came across ship

number twenty-nine. The manner in which this one was discovered told in advance of something abnormal about it. The detectors reported it while JIath and Nfam were mentally feeling through the dark and getting no evidence of anything so near. The reason: the homarachnids were seeking enemy thought-forms and this ship held no thoughts, not one.

Orbiting around a lesser moon, the mystery vessel's design and markings showed it to be an auxiliary warship or armed freighter of Nilean origin. An old and battered rocket-job long overdue for scrapping, it appeared to have been pressed into further service for the duration of the war. It had a medium gun in its bow, fixed torpedo tubes to port and starboard and could aim its missiles only by laboriously positioning itself with respect to the target. A sorry object fit for nothing but escort duty on short runs in a quiet sector, it seemed hardly worth the bother of putting down to ground.

But Lawson and his crew were curious about it. An old but quite intact spaceship totally devoid of evidence of thinking mentalities was somewhat of a phenomenon. It could mean several unusual things all equally worth discovering. No matter how extremely remote the likelihood of anyone developing a screen that homarachnids could not penetrate in search of mind-forms lurking behind, the theoretical possibility could not be ruled out. Nothing is finally and completely impossible.

Alternatively there was the million to one chance that the vessel was crewed by a non-thinking, purely reactive and robotic life-form allied to the Nileans. Or, more plausibly, that one of Markhamwit's warships was employing a new weapon capable of slaughtering crews without so much as scratching their vessels, and this particular vessel was a victim. Or, lastly and likeliest, that it had been abandoned and left crewless but carefully parked in a balanced orbit for some reason known only to the deserters.

As the Solarian boat swooped toward the point marked by its detectors, Nfam and JIath strove hurriedly to probe the nearby moon for any minds holding the secret of the silent objective. There wasn't time. They whirled high above the target, automatically

recorded its nature, type and markings, and in the next breath had been carried leagues beyond it. The Solarian ship commenced to turn into a wide curve that would bring it back for another once-over. They did not get a second look.

Designed to cope with objects moving considerably slower, the instruments aboard the silent freighter registered the presence of another vessel just a little too late. In less than a millipart, vacuum tubes flashed, relays snapped over and the freighter exploded. It was vivid and violent blast guaranteed to disable and possibly destroy any battleship that came within snooping distance. It failed in its intent solely because the prospective recipient of the thump already was far outpacing the flying fragments, of which there were plenty.

"Booby trap," said Lawson. "We'd have been handed a beautiful wallop if our maximum velocity was down to the crawl that local types regard as conventional."

"Yes," responded a bee-mind from somewhere nearer the tail. "And did those two mad hatters warn you of it? Did you hear them screaming, 'Don't go near! Oh, please, don't go near!' and feel them pawing at your arm?"

"It seems to me," remarked Nfam to Jlath, "that I detect the sharp, grating voice of jealousy, the bitter whine of a lesser life-form incapable of and unsuitable for self adornment."

"We don't need it," retorted the critic back. "We don't have to return to artificial devices as a means of lending false color to pale, insipid personalities. We have—"

"No hands," put in Nfam, with great dexterity.

"And they fight with their rear ends," added Jlath for good measure.

"Now see here, Frog-food, we—"

"Shut up!" roared Lawson with sudden violence.

They went silent. The ship bulleted onward in search of target number thirty.

THE next encounter provided an orgy that served to illustrate the superiority of mass-mind efficiency as compared with artificial methods of communication and coordination. Far off across the wheel of light that formed the galaxy a Solarian named

Ellis pursued a multitude of bellicose thought-forms traced by his homarachnids and discovered two fleets assembling for battle. The news flashed out to all and sundry even as he snatched a super-dreadnought lumbering toward the scene and planted it where it would stay put.

Lawson immediately altered course, boosted his vessel to detector-defeating velocity. There was a long way to go according to this galaxy's estimates of distances but a relative jaunt from the Solarian viewpoint. Unseen and unsuspected, the vessel scudded over a host of worlds, most of them uninhabitable, sterile, deserted.

At one point Nfam's questioning mind found a convoy of ten ships huddled together and heading for the system of a binary, determined them to be neutral traders hoping to make port without interference by one or the other belligerents. Farther on, nearer the twin suns, a pair of Markhamwit's light destroyers hung in space ready to halt and search the convoy for whatever they saw fit to declare illegal transport of strategic war materials. The Solarian vessel promptly cut its speed, herded these two wolves into a suitable cage, raced onward. The convoy continued to plug along innocent of the obstruction so arbitrarily removed from its path.

By the time Lawson got there the scene of intended conflict already had lost some of its orderliness and was dissolving toward eventual chaos. A Nilean force of many hundreds had disposed itself in a huge hemisphere protecting a close-packed group of seven solar systems that were not worth a hoot. Markhamwit's fleet commanders accordingly reasoned that such strength would be marshaled only to defend a sector vital to the enemy's war economy and that therefore these seven systems must be captured and scoured regardless of cost. Which was what the Nileans wanted them to think, for, being slightly the weaker party, they knew the value of diverting attention from genuinely critical points by offering the foe a glittering but valueless prize elsewhere. So both sides beamed frantic orders to and fro, strove to get ready to rend the heavens for the sake of what neither could use. The trouble was that preparations refused to work out as they should have done accord-

ing to the book.

Established tactics of space warfare seemed to be becoming disestablished. Orthodox methods of squaring up to the enemy were not producing orthodox results. The recognized moves of placing light forces here and heavy ones there, a spearhead thus and a defensive screen so, a powerful reserve in that place and a follow-up force in this place, were making a fine mess of the whole issue. Bewilderment among commanders on both sides resembled that of an expert who finds that a certain experiment produces the same results nine hundred ninety-nine times but not the thousandth.

Introduction of a new and yet unidentified factor was the cause of all this. The time lag in their communications beam systems, with coded messages flashed from repeater station to repeater station, was so great that none in this sector knew what had happened to the impudent visitors on their home worlds or that Solarians had turned from argument to action. True, some ships were overdue in this area and presumed lost, but that was inevitable. Losses must be expected in time of war and there was nothing to be gained by investigating the fate of the missing or by trying to ascertain the cause of their disappearance.

So deeply embedded were these notions that for quite a time both sides remained blindly unaware of what was happening right under their noses. And the emotions of opposing commanders remained those of extreme irritation rather than real alarm. Inside their military minds conditioning masqueraded as logic and stated that a fight was trying to get going, that any fight is between two parties with nobody else present except maybe one or two mere lookers-on. Such pseudo-reasoning automatically prevented swift realization of intervention by a third party. Whoever heard of a three-sided battle?

Mutually bedeviled, both belligerents postponed their onslaughts while they continued to try and get ready, meanwhile blundering around like a pair of once-eager boxers temporarily diverted from their original purpose by the sudden appearance of numerous ants in the pants.

And the ants kept them on the hop. Lawson's vessel plummeted unseen and un-

detected right into the middle of the Nilean hemisphere, picked up three boats thundering along under orders to patrol off a certain planet, put them down on said planet for keeps. So far as the Nilean origin-giver was concerned, three of his vessels had commenced to move in obedience to commands, had continuously signalled progress, then cut off without warning as if snatched out of Creation. He sent a light, fast scout to discover what had occurred. That one radiated messages until within viewing distance of the appointed post and went silent. He sent another. Same result. It was like dropping pennies down the drain. He gave up, reported the mystery to battle headquarters, sought under his backstrap for a persistent nibbler that had been pestering him all day.

The causes of all this cussedness would have been identified more quickly and easily had one crew been able to beam a warning that they were about to come under the mental mastery of those in a strange vessel of unknown origin. But none were ever aware of what was about to happen. None were aware that it had happened until the cause had gone elsewhere, the influence had been removed and they found themselves sitting on solid earth and dumb-foundedly contemplating a vessel converted to so much scrap.

It was like stealing lollipops from the inmates of a babies' home except that there always lurked an element of danger due to lining up of fortuitious circumstances that none could anticipate. Ellis and his ship and crew went out of existence in a brilliant flash of light when they dived down upon what appeared to be a Nilean flotilla moving at sedate pace toward the hemisphere's rim and discovered one millipart too late that it consisted of a heavy cruiser shepherding under remote control a group of unmanned booby traps.

EVERY Solarian in the tremendous area knew of this counter-blow the instant the stroke took place. Everyone sensed it as a sudden cessation of life that has been a small part of one's own. It was like the complete vanishing from one's mind of a long-held and favorite thought. None brooded. None felt a pang of regret. They

were not inclined to such sentiment because sorrow can never remove its own cause. A few hairs had fallen from an immense corporate whole, but the body remained.

Half a time-unit afterward James Lawson and his crew exacted sweet revenge, not with that motive, but purely as a tactic. They did it by making opportune use of the enemy's organizational setup which like many sources of great strength was also a source of great weakness. Weld men and materials into a mighty machine and they are thereby converted into something capable of mighty collapse the moment the right nut or bolt is removed.

A formidable Nilean battle squadron of one hundred forty assorted ships was running out of the hemisphere in a great, curving course that eventually would position them slightly behind the extreme wing of Markhamwit's assembly. This was the strictly orthodox move of trying to place a flanking party strong enough to endanger any main thrust at the center. If Markhamwit's scouts spotted this threat, his array would have to divert a force able to meet and beat it. It was all so easy for those who sat in opposing battle headquarters, planning and counter-planning, directing vessels here and there, operating the great combat machines.

And just because the machines were machines, Lawson had no difficulty in pulling out an essential bolt. He took over the entire squadron lock, stock and barrel. All that was necessary was for Nfam and JIath to gain mental mastery of those aboard the admiral's vessel commanding the rest. One ship! The others did exactly as this enslaved vessel ordered, moving through space like a flock of sheep.

The big squadron turned into a new course, built up to top velocity because the admiral's boat so ordered. They ignored the now visible Solarian stranger in their midst because the admiral unquestioningly accepted its presence. They pushed for their faraway home world as fast as they could drive because The Boss so commanded.

Lawson stayed with them to the half-way point and long after he'd left they continued on course, made no attempt to return. The Boss was not going to admit to an entire fleet that he was afflicted with mental confusion, could not remember receiv-

ing or transmitting an order to head for home. Obviously he must have had such instructions, or why were they here, making for where they were going? Best to keep straight on and hide the fact that he was subject to spasms of dopiness. So on they went, one hundred forty vessels bamboozled right out of the fray.

In short time Reeder's vessel performed a similar service for the Great Lord. A reserve force of eighty-eight ships, mostly heavy cruisers, pushed homeward with closed signal channels in accordance with orders from their own commanding officer. Soon informed of this unauthorized departure, the top brass at battle headquarters foamed at the mouth, switched switches, levered levers and stabbed buttons, filled the ether with contra-commands, threats and bloodthirsty promises while still the reserve continued to blunder through the starfield with all receivers sealed and no mutinous ears burning.

Bombs and bullets are of little avail without intelligence to direct them. Take away the intelligence, if only for a little while, and the entire warmaking apparatus of a major power become so much junk. The Solarian attack was irresistibly formidable because it was concentrated on the very root-cause of all action, the very motivating force behind all instruments great or small. Solarian logic argued that gun-plus-mind is a weapon whereas gun-without-mind is a mere article no matter how inherently efficient.

The Nilean booby traps were no exception, neither was any other robotic arm, for in effect they were delayed action weapons from which minds had gone into hiding by removing themselves in space and time. The minds originating each booby trap were difficult to trace, hence the fate suffered by Ellis and his crew. But in the long run they were being dealt with as ship after ship became grounded, squadrons, flotillas and convoys departed for someplace else and chaos threatened to become complete. In proof of which the jumpy Nilean high command twice made serious errors by diverting ships that sprang their own traps and thus added a pleasing note to the general confusion.

By the fiftieth time-unit the Solarians had

an imposing array of statistics to consider. Fourteen ships destroyed by accident, including one of their own. Eight hundred fifty-one vessels nailed down to various inhabitable planets and satellites. One thousand two hundred sixty-six shiploads of the mentally deceived hellbent for other places, mostly home. Increasing evidence of demoralization in the battle headquarters of both belligerents. Truly the long term chivvying of weaker neutrals was being paid for, heavily, with compound interest. It might be sufficient to convince stubborn minds that a myth can be a very real thing when dragged out of the past and dumped into the present day.

THEY conferred among themselves and across a galactic gap while their ships continued to flash to and fro. If the opposing parties' battle headquarters were taken under mental control the entire war parade could be scattered through the heavens at a few imposed words of command. They were reluctant to take matters as far as that. It would come much too near a demonstration of near-godlike dictatorship over all lesser creatures.

The basic Solarian idea was to create respect for an essential law by creating respect for those behind it. To overdo the job by just a little too much would be to establish wholesale fear of themselves throughout the galaxy. Some dread here and there could not be avoided when dealing with less developed minds inclined to superstition, but they were deeply anxious not to create ineradicable fear as a substitute for enlightened tolerance. Since they were trying to cope with two kinds of alien minds not identically the same, it was a touchy matter judging exactly how far they must go in order to achieve the desired result while avoiding the other. How many times should a candidate for baptism be dunked to give him salvation without pneumonia?

By mutual consent they carried on for another time-unit, at the end of which the movements of vessels still controlled by the top brass showed that Nilean forces were striving to regroup in readiness for withdrawal. Their answer to that was to cease all blows at Nileans and concentrate exclusively on Markhamwit's equally confused

but more mulish armada. Though slower to make up their minds, the Great Lord's commanders were swifter to act once they'd reached a decision. In due time they saw without difficulty that this was an inauspicious date for victory and they'd do better to bide next Friday week. Which means that they started to pull out, fast.

"Enough!"

It flashed from mind to mind, and Lawson said with approval, "Good work, boys."

"Our work invariably is first class," assured Nfam. Removing his toque, he blew imaginary dust from it, smoothed its feather, put it on at a rakish angle. "I have earned myself a new bonnet."

"Treat yourself to a new head while you're at it," advised the thought-form of Buzwuz from his haunt nearer the stern.

"Petty spitefulness characteristic of the childlike," commented JIath, nodding his fez until its crimson ribbon waggled. "I have long been intrigued by a phenomenon that someday must be investigated."

"Such as?" prompted Nfam.

"The nearer they are to Sol, the higher in intelligence. The farther out, the lower."

Buzwuz shrilled back, "Let me tell you, Spider-shape, that outside the Asteroid Belt they're—"

"Shut up!" bellowed Lawson, thus staking a biped claim in this scramble for superiority.

They went quiet, not because they were overawed by him, not because they considered him any better or worse than themselves, but solely because it was notorious that his two-legged kind could argue the tail off an alligator and cast grave doubts upon its parentage while doing so. If the Solarian mass mind had a special compartment reserved for flights of vocal fancy duly embellished with pointed witticisms it was without doubt located on a dump called Terra.

So they held their peace while he boosted the speed and headed for the gypsy planet on which two ships already were waiting to collect the various homarachnids and take them nearer home. There was no need to consult star maps and seek the highly erratic course of the wandering sphere. He could have chased it across half the galaxy and hit it dead center with his eyes shut. All that

was needed was to steer straight along the thought-stream emanating from the pair of Solarian vessels waiting there.

It was as easy as that.

XI

THE follow-up process was delayed. Held back deliberately and of malice aforethought. The sluggish communications systems of warring life-forms had been greatly to the advantage of Solarians, but now time must be allowed for those same systems to deliver data to Markhamwit and Glastrom. No use Lawson and Reeder taking them the news in person. They would not be believed until confirmation arrived in large dollops.

And after the warlords had gained a clear picture of recent events further time must be given for the complete digestion thereof. Since the Nileans were by nature a little more impulsive and a little less stubborn than their opponents it was likely that they would be the first to agree that it is unprofitable to play hob with common property such as the free space between worlds.

Markhamwit would be the last to give in. He would have a soul-searing period of balancing loss of face against the growing pile of awkward facts. He must have time to work out for himself that it is better to drop an autocratic obsession than ultimately drop at the end of a rope. Being what he was—a prominent member of his own kind—he'd have no illusions about the fate of one who insists on leading his people to total defeat.

A couple of days before the Nileans were due to become mentally ripe, Reeder burst through the defense screen of their home world, dropped a packet in Glastrom's palace yard, whipped back into the eternal starfield before guards or aerial patrols fully realized what had taken place.

Ten time-units later—making carefully estimated allowance for Markhamwit's more reluctant character—Lawson obliged with a similar bundle that crowned the fat Kasine as he waddled across the area outside the interrogation center. The thump on that worthy's dome was not intentional. Nobody could go by at such pace and achieve such perfection of aim. It was wholly accidental,

but to the end of his days Kasine would never believe it.

Struggling to his feet, Kasine addressed a few well-chosen words to the sky, took the bundle indoors, gave it to the captain of the guard who gave it to the garrison commander who gave it to the chief of intelligence. That official immediately recalled the fate of a predecessor who hurriedly burst open a parcel from someone who was not a friend. So with the minimum of delay he passed it to Minister Ganne who with equal alacrity handed it to the addressee, the Great Lord Markhamwit, and found an excuse to get out of the room.

Viewing the unwanted gift with much disfavor, Markhamwit found his plug and tube, called the chief of intelligence, ordered him to provide an expendable warrior to come lean out the window and open the thing. The chief of intelligence told the garrison commander who told the captain of the guard who duly pushed along a loyal thickhead of low rank and no importance.

The task performed without dire result, Markhamwit found himself with a thick wad of star maps. Spreading them over his desk he stared at them irefully. All bore liberal markings, with certain worlds and satellites clearly numbered. On the reverse side of each was a list of ships stalled on the appropriate spheres, plus roughly estimated strength of crews thus marooned and a further estimate of how long each group could survive unaided.

The longer he studied this collection the more riled he felt. Approximately one-fifth of his total forces had been put out of action according to this data. One-fifth of his battle-wagons were scrap metal scattered far across the light years. Assuming that it would be asking for further trouble to employ armed vessels, it would require full use of his gunless merchant-fleet to rescue and bring home the crews languishing on a couple of hundred worlds. And if he made no attempt to save them there would be trouble aplenty on this world.

He did not know it, but he had another twenty time-units in which to think things over.

At the end of that period Lawson returned.

THE second arrival was exactly like the first. At one moment the plain stood empty, with the city gray and grim in the north, the bluish sun burning above and the smallest of the three moons going down in the east. Next moment the ship was there, a thin streak of dust settling behind its tail as if to show that there had been motion even though unseen.

Overhead the aerial patrol circled and swirled as before. This time there was some risk that they might bomb without waiting for orders. A slick trick creates greater fury when repeated and sometimes becomes too much to bear.

"If a man does thee once it's his fault; if he does thee twice it's thy fault!"

But again the Solarian visitor's behavior was that of one completely unconscious of such dangers or completely indifferent to them. It lay on the plain, a clear target. The patrol dropped nothing but did scream the news to the city's chief communications center.

Consequence was that a couple of truckloads of troops raced onto the plain even as Lawson emerged from the lock. He came out breathing deeply, enjoying the fresh air, the feel of solid earth underfoot. Several winged shapes buzzed ecstatically out of the lock, zoomed into the sky, chased after each other and put over a bee-version of sailors in port.

Disregarding the oncomers from the city, the bee-minds were swapping thoughts intended mainly for the benefit of the biped. They deplored his lack of wings. They questioned the wisdom of Nature in putting sentient life upon two inadequate feet. Ah, the pity of it all!

Lawson took not the slightest notice of this sympathy squinting down from the skies. Among Solarian multikind there was no real consciousness of shape in any serious sense. Differences in form were referred to and commented upon—always unfavorably—only for purposes of kidding, which same was everlasting and unmerciful. The Solarian mass mind had a remarkable facility for drawing odious comparisons within itself, for no useful purpose whatsoever. It was done in much the same way that a well-thatched biped would patronizingly refer to the baldness of another biped for whom

he would fight to the bitter end.

There was indestructible oneness among mutually sarcastic parts. This plus-quantity in the multikind psyche had determined the manner of Lawson's first contact on this world and equally determined the second. He was acutely aware of the mentalities of Markhamwit's people but well-nigh blind to their physical differences. The latter did not matter. How could they matter? The former counted a lot; it meant everything.

At some time in the far past Terrans, Venusians, Callistrans, Martians, Rheans and several others had merged into a greater spiritual unity. At some time in the far future the Solarians themselves would again merge into a unity infinitely greater. Only reason why the process had been confined to the worlds of Sol was that all others outside had proved unripe for assimilation. All others were comparative children with the petty loyalties, the parochialisms, the jealousies, the spite, the emotional tantrums and the unimaginative cruelty of children.

Someday the children would grow up.

Already, here and there, one or two almost were grown up.

Thus so far as Lawson and his crew were concerned the truckloads making toward them contained an armed company of mental moppets of no particular shape or form. And Markhamwit himself would have been appalled to learn that his own status was that of the muscular bully of grade one.

The trucks pulled up and the troops tumbled out. Though Lawson did not know it, his attitude and expression had been perfectly duplicated in the dawn of history by a gentleman named Casey who wore a cap and badge. The corner cop watching the kids come out of school. The lesson learned was the same now as then, produced the same results: the unruly members of this crowd had had to be taught respect for Casey.

They'd learned it all right; it was evident from what they did next. There was no hostile surrounding of the ship, guns loaded and held ready. Instead they formed up in two ranks, wide apart like a guard of honor. A three-comet officer marched forward, saluted ceremoniously.

"Sire, you have returned to see the Great Lord?"

"I have." Lawson blinked, looked him over. "Why the 'sire'? I do not have any military rank."

"You are the ship's commander," said the other, signing toward the vessel.

"I am its pilot," Lawson corrected. "Nobody commands it."

"Somebody must have supreme authority in a ship," remarked the officer, a mite uncertainly.

"Why?"

"One cannot have coordination without it."

"We can."

"Yes, sire," said the officer, determinedly refusing to dispute the incredible.

"There you go again!" Lawson reproved. He eyed the trucks. "Are you supposed to take me to the Great Lord?"

"Yes, sire."

"On whose orders?"

"Minister Ganne's," informed the other. "He also said I must leave a couple of sentries to guard your vessel."

"Against whom?"

The officer screwed up his eyes, looked bothered. "I'm sure I don't know, sire. It is the usual formality to provide a guard."

"A thoughtful precaution," commented Lawson. "If this world is full of thieves and scoundrels."

Three Comets found himself in the position of wanting to resist this unfortunate suggestion without thereby denying the need for an armed guard. But he couldn't have it both ways. So far as he could recall this was the first time he'd had pointed out the implication behind a customary arrangement. There was no way of getting rid of the one without automatically condemning the other.

And destructive criticism of military routine was unthinkable. He could lose his bowels along with his comets for less than that.

With a touch of desperation, he ended the disconcerting talk by motioning toward a truck. "This way, sire."

Grinning to himself, Lawson climbed into the cab, was driven citywards. He kept silence during the journey. The officer did likewise, inwardly feeling that this was one of those days when one can be tempted to say too much.

THE Great Lord Markhamwit was sitting in his chair with his four arms lying negligently on its rests, his features smooth and composed. Many days ago he had been in a choleric frenzy of activity as he strove to organize a war that refused to jell. A few days back he'd been in a blind fury, pacing the room, hammering the table, volleying oaths and threats as a volcano spews lava. A few time-units ago reaction had set in as he contemplated an enormous mass of frustrating data topped by the star maps that had bounced off Kasine. Now he was resigned, fatalistic. It was the calm after the storm. He was nearly ripe for reason.

This was to be expected. Solarian tactics did not accord paramount importance to the question of *what* must be done to achieve a given end. It was of equal and occasionally of greater importance to determine precisely *when* it must be begun, how long it must be maintained and *when* it should be ended. Words like *how* or *what* did not dominate a word like *when* in Solarian thinking.

Circumstances were radically altered when Lawson ambled into the room for his third interview. His manner was the same as before, but now Markhamwit and Ganne studied him with wary curiosity rather than bellicose irritation.

Seating himself, Lawson crossed his legs, smiled at the Great Lord rather as one would at an obstreperous child after a domestic scene.

"Well?"

Markhamwit said slowly and evenly, "I have been in direct touch with Glastrom. We are recalling all ships."

"That's being sensible. More's the pity that it's had to be paid for by many of your crews languishing on lonely worlds."

"We have agreed to cooperate in bringing them home. The Nileans pick up and deliver any of our people they find. We do the same for them."

"Much nicer than cutting each other's throats, isn't it?"

Markhamwit countered, "You told me you didn't care."

"Neither do we. It's when innocent bystanders get pushed around that we see fit to chip in."

Lawson made to get up as if at this stage his task was finished because Solarian aims

had been gained. Nothing daunted, the Great Lord spoke hurriedly.

"Before you go I'd like answers to three questions."

"What are they?"

"In honest fact do you come from a galaxy other than this one?"

"Most certainly."

Frowning at a secret thought, Markhamwit went on, "Have you sterilized any world belonging to us or the Nileans?"

"Sterilized?" Lawson registered puzzlement.

"As you are said to have done to the Elmones."

"Oh, that!" He dismissed it in the manner of something never contemplated even for a moment. "You're referring to an incident of long, long ago. We used weapons in those days. We have outgrown them now. We harm nobody."

"I beg to differ." Markhamwit pointed to the star maps piled up on one side. "On your own showing eight of my ships have been destroyed, crews and all."

"Plus five Nilean vessels and one of our own," Lawson said. "All by accidents over which we had no control. For example, two of your cruisers collided head-on. Our presence had nothing to do with it."

Accepting this without dispute, Markhamwit leaned forward, put his last question. "You have established a law that free space shall be completely free to all. We have recognized it. We have given in. I think that entitles us to know why you are so interested in the space ethics of a galaxy not your own."

STANDING up, Lawson met him eye for eye. "Behind that query lurks the agreement you have just made with Glastrom, namely, that you drop all your differences in the face of common peril from outside. You have secretly agreed to conform to the common law until such time as you have developed ships as good as or better than our own. Then, when you feel strong enough, you will join together and shave us down to whatever you regard as proper size."

"That does not answer my question," Markhamwit pointed out, not bothering to confirm or deny this accusation.

"The answer is one you'll fail to see."

"Let me be the judge of that."

"Well, it's like this," Lawson explained, "Solarians are not a shape or form. They're a multikind destined ultimately to lose identity in a combine still greater and wider. They are the beginning of a growth of associated minds designed to conquer universal matter. The free, unhampered use of space is the basic essential of such growth."

"Why?"

"Because the next contributions to a cosmos-wide supermind will come from this galaxy. That's where the laugh is on you."

"On me?" The Great Lord was baffled.

"On your particular life-form. You overlook the question of time. And time is all-important."

"What do you mean?"

"By the time either you or the Nileans have created techniques advanced enough to challenge us even remotely, both you and they will be more than ready for assimilation."

"I don't understand."

Lawson went to the door. "Someday both you and the Nileans will be inseparable parts of each other and, like us, components of a mightier whole. You will come to it rather late but you'll get there just the same. Meanwhile we will not allow those in front to be held back by those behind. Each comes in his own natural turn, delayed by no prickly neighbors."

He smiled. Then he departed.

"My lord, did you understand what he meant?" Minister Ganne said.

"I have a glimmering," Markhamwit was thoughtful. "He was talking about events not due until five, ten or twenty thousand years after we two are dead."

"How did he get to know our arrangement with Glastrom?"

"He doesn't know since nobody could have told him. He made a shrewd guess, and he was absolutely correct as we are aware." Markhamwit brooded a bit, added, "It makes me wonder how close he'll get with his longer shot."

"Which one, my lord?"

"That by the time we're big enough to dare try beat up what he calls his multikind it will be too late, for we shall then be part of that multikind."

"I can't imagine it," admitted Ganne.

"I can't imagine people crossing an intergalactic chasm. Neither can Yielm or any of our experts," Markhamwit said. "I can't imagine anyone successfully waging a major war without any weapons whatsoever." His tones became slightly peevish as he finished, "And that supports the very one of his points that I dislike the most: that our brains are not yet adequate. We suffer from limited imaginations."

"Yes, my lord," agreed Ganne.

"Speak for yourself," snapped Markhamwit. "I can stir up mine a bit even if others can't. I'm going to see Glastrom in person. Maybe we can get together and, by persuasion rather than by force, so reorganize the galaxy that it becomes too big and strong and united to be absorbed by any menagerie from elsewhere. It's well worth a try." He stopped, stared at Ganne, demanded, "Why do you look like a bilious skouniss?"

"You have reminded me of something he said," explained Ganne unhappily. "He said, 'Someday both you and the Nileans will be inseparable parts of each other and, like us, components of a mightier whole.' If you go to see Glastrom it means we're heading exactly that way—already!"

Markhamwit flopped back in his chair, gnawed the nails on four hands in turn. He hated to admit it but Ganne was right. The only satisfactory method of trying to catch up on Solarian competition was to toil along the same cooperative path to the same communal end that could not and would not remain compartmented in one galaxy. Not to try was to accept defeat and sink into dark obscurity that ultimately would cover them for all time, making them like the Elmones, a name, a memory, a rumor.

There were only two ways to go: forward or backward.

Forward to the inevitable.

Or backward to the inevitable.

And it had to be forward.

LAWSON returned to the ship knowing that his crew already were aboard and eager to go. Getting out of the truck, he thanked the driver, walked toward the lock, stopped when nearby and carefully examined the sentry posted outside it.

"I think we have met before," he offered pleasantly.

Yadiz refused the bait. He kept tight hold on his gun, ignored the voice, ignored a couple of persistent itches. One learns by experience he had decided, and when in the presence of a Solarian the safest thing is to play statues.

"Oh, well, if that's the way you feel about it," Lawson shrugged, climbed into the lock, looked down from the rim and advised, "We're taking off. There'll be some suction. If you don't want a sudden rise in the world you'd better take shelter behind that rock."

Thinking it over, Yadiz decided to take the suggestion. He marched toward the indicated point, still saying nothing. He could have mentioned another sentry at the ship's opposite side, but he didn't. To open one's mouth is to get involved in difficulties. To close it is to let others get involved.

Lawson sat in the pilot's seat, fingered the little lever. Far out at the edge of the galaxy, lost to view in the great spray of stardust, were a pair of life-forms developing a kindred spirit. Near to them was a third form, more numerous, arrogant and ready to fill the power vacuum left by Glastrom and Markhamwit. Far out there among the stars the stage was set for interference. Something must be done about it. A few knuckles must be rapped.

He moved the lever.

Crouching behind his rock Yadiz heard a deep *whoomp*, clung desperately to his cap and gun while dust and stones whirled skyward. Then he stood up, watched the anticipated body fall almost at his feet. The body struggled erect, dusted itself.

Yadiz said, "What were you doing up there, Boonsnucker?"

"I was coming down," informed that worthy, sourly.

"So I noticed," observed Yadiz, with great disdain. "And now you are fifty yards from your post."

Bending, Boonsnucker picked up a wooden stake that had thumped to earth beside him, flourished it triumphantly and said, "This time my post came with me!"

To which none but a Solarian could have found a suitable answer.

THE IMAGINATIVE MAN

By BRYAN BERRY

Of the two survivors who crash-landed on Venus only Clarke, the sensitive-minded one, could see those miraculous inhabitants... those mythological weirdies. Gear-gaited Bainbridge, the fool, was acting like a normal homo.

DOWN from the blackness of space, through the grayness of the Venusian sky, the rocket cut its path, speeding.

It fed on the sky, gobbling clouds and spreading them out behind in a raw red pencil of burning. And as it came down the rocket screamed and bellowed at the planet in anger and defiance. Then, perhaps because of someone's carelessness, because of some small fault that nobody had noticed, because of a fragment of grit lodged in some delicate mechanism, because of one of a million possibilities—the sleek rocket crashed.

There was silence on the planet Venus.

The rocket lay on its side on the mountain slope like a stranded porpoise, buckled and broken.

Within the rocket a hand stretched out, felt about, searching. There was blood on the hand. Then, with a series of small groans, the owner of the hand picked himself up, holding his head. He straightened and looked at the mangled interior of the rocket and at the four red, wet splotches that had been members of the crew, their heads like whipped cream and crushed strawberries on the metal plates of the rocket wall.

Behind him a voice said, "Oh, God," feebly.

The first man turned, bent down and pulled the figure out from beneath the tangle of cables that had spilled out of the shattered wall like metal spaghetti when the crash had come.

"You're all right, Clarke. Let me see that hand." Bandages and antiseptics flashed in expert fingers. "There. Better?"

"Thanks." Clarke sat up, looking about him. When he saw the splotches he looked

away quickly, retching. "Just the two of us left, then?" he asked.

"'Fraid so," said Bainbridge.

Clarke stood up. "Hey, that's blood on your fingers."

"Just a small cut, nothing to worry over. Come on, we'd better get outside."

"The first men on Venus. Phew!" said Clarke, looking at his bandaged hand.

"Not such a happy landing as it might have been," said Bainbridge. "Let's hope the second rocket doesn't go the same way—it's due here shortly after us."

Clarke pointed to the splotches. "What are we going to do about them?"

"We'll take them out and bury them when we've had a good look round. Come on, let's find out what Venus is like." He walked unsteadily across the floor of the rocket to the airlock.

The two men stepped out onto the rocky mountainside. Behind them the rocket was a black egg against the whiteness of the cliff, and the sky was a pale gray sheet covering it all. On the slope of the mountain there were a lot of trees.

"Well, here we are," said Clarke, breathing deeply, "Venus."

The silence of the planet made a wall around the two men. There was neither murmur of stream nor cry of bird, only silence.

"Quiet, isn't it?" said Clarke.

Bainbridge smiled and nodded. "Did you know you were whispering?" he asked.

Clarke laughed, stirring his feet in the rich black soil. "Was I? This place makes you want to speak softly. Somehow it seems wrong to do otherwise."

They looked around for a few minutes more and then they started the task they



dreaded—burying the bodies of their companions.

WITHIN an hour and twenty minutes there were four wooden crosses in a neat row beside the rocket, and there was sweat on the two men's brows.

"Poor old Markham. He wanted to reach Venus more than any of us. His whole life centered round it." Clarke shook his head sadly.

Bainbridge nodded. "Let's get the tents and make a camp here. We're somewhere in the Twilight Zone and it's getting dark. A good night's sleep will do us good. We can look round more thoroughly in the morning."

They set up the aluminium fabric tents and made a small fire. Clarke managed to get at the canned food supplies within the rocket and they sat in the firelight eating and drinking fine hot coffee.

The land was still all about them. There was no sign of movement, no sound to tell them that there might be any other form of active life on the planet.

"I can't help thinking that there must be something here besides us," said Clarke. "This place is obviously capable of supporting life. The trees, for example, deciduous, same as on Earth. If there's anything in Parbright's theory of parallel evolutionary trends then it stands to reason that there must be some form of animal life here." He took a long swallow of coffee, letting the hot liquid settle on his tongue, tasting the flavor appreciatively. "I wonder what they will think of us," he said, "when and if we find them."

Silence crept between the two men once more. They finished their coffee and sat watching the fire die down. Twenty minutes passed, perhaps more.

"You know," started Clarke.

"What—?"

"I've got a feeling I was right about there being life here on Venus. I've got the impression that there's something very close to us right now."

Bainbridge laughed. "Imagination," he said. "We'll have a good look round the place in the morning. Right now I feel like some sleep." He walked over to the far tent. "Good-night," he said.

"Good-night," replied Clarke, staring across the dying fire at the deep and ominous darkness.

He sat there for some time thinking. And he let the stillness of Venus settle about him like a web spun by a thousand black and silent spiders. "What is it that is watching me?" he thought. "There is something watching, I know."

An hour went by. The fire died with a final protesting spluttering.

Clarke started to shiver. It felt as though a small cold hand was creeping about on the back of his neck. It was the feeling he had had when they had blasted off back on Earth, and again over Venus when the stabilizers had started acting up. It was fear.

He pulled a torch from his belt and clicked it on.

The thing stood in the pool of light and looked at Clarke. It had furry legs and its face was small and brown and wizened.

Cloven hoofs clicked as it walked forward.

"So you've reached us at last, have you?" it said.

Clarke opened his mouth and then closed it. At last he said: "But you're a faun."

The faun nodded, brightly.

"But—" started Clarke.

"But nothing," said the faun. "I'm a faun and that's all there is to it. Where are the other men?"

"One's sleeping, the others—" Clarke pointed to the crosses with his torch.

The faun nodded silently.

"But what are you?" Clarke exploded. "You say you're a faun, but that can't be so. For a start we're on Venus, and secondly there aren't such things as fauns anyway." Clarke thought about what he had just said and realized how stupid it sounded. Here he was talking to something that looked as if it had stepped out of a book on Greek mythology, and telling it that it couldn't exist. It was too absurd.

"If I'm not a faun then what am I?"

"You're—you're a Venusian."

"Correct. Hasn't it struck you that the Venusians might be fauns? Or centaurs, even, or dragons, or griffins? All of those things?"

"You mean all the things that men don't believe in?"

"All the things that most men don't believe in, yes."

"Most men?"

"Well, you see me, so deep down you must believe in me."

"Nonsense, ridiculous," said Clarke, too loudly.

From the far tent came a sleep-filled voice. "Calling me?"

FOR some reason Clarke did not want Bainbridge to come out. "It's all right," he called. "I went to sleep by the fire and must have called out in my sleep."

No answer. Clarke waited for the other man to come out of the tent but he did not do so. Presumably he had gone back to sleep.

"You were saying it was nonsense and ridiculous, I think," said the faun, sitting down in the darkness near Clarke and stirring the soil with cloven hoofs.

"I was, yes. And nonsense and ridiculous it is, you talking to me like this. You aren't really there at all, or if you are then you are a Venusian endowed with the power of altering its atomic structure so as to appear as something else. The only other explanation is that you read my mind, found out what a faun looks—is supposed to look like, and then hypnotized me into seeing you as one. You're probably a fifty-tentacled monstrosity!"

"I am not," said the faun, piqued. "I'm a faun, simply that."

"Well, I don't believe it," replied Clarke, feeling at his belt for his blaster and then stopping for a reason he could not quite understand. "Supposing you are a faun," he said after a pause, "how is it that we have fauns recorded in our mythology back on Earth? How is it that you're here on Venus, and what did you mean when you said 'So you've reached us at last'? Answer those."

The faun smiled an ancient Grecian smile. "First: you have fauns in your mythology because we were all on Earth at one time; fauns and centaurs, sirens and nymphs and everything. Second: we're here on Venus because belief in us died out on Earth and people couldn't see us any more. Third: we knew that man would eventually conquer space with some sort of machine and it was evident that he would reach us

one day. Does that answer you?"

Clarke put his head in his hands. "Unthinkable," he said.

"Unbelievable, perhaps," said the faun, "but by no means unthinkable. You're starting to believe it, anyway. I can tell. You're one of the few men who can see us."

Clarke looked up. "You said that no one could see you nowadays, didn't you? You told me just now that that was the reason you left Earth to come here."

"Well, what I meant was that the general belief in our existence died out. There were still some who saw us and believed; the poets, artists, writers, musicians and so on. The sensitive people saw us but not the masses. You must be sensitive."

Clarke propped the torch up on its tripod legs so that the light fell on the faun. "You haven't convinced me yet," he said. "How did you reach Venus, anyway?"

The faun wagged a lean brown finger. "Magic," it said, "or what you would call teleportation, you with your long and scientific names for things."

"Prove it," said Clarke, sneering.

"Pardon?" said the faun from inside the first aluminum tent.

Clark swiveled the torch on its tripod. "How—?" he started.

"Magic," said the faun, "or teleportation; whichever word you care to use." Then the faun stepped daintily out of the tent and walked over to where Clarke was standing with his mouth open. "Now do you believe?"

There was nothing Clarke could do but nod.

"Good," said the faun, disappearing.

Clarke stared at the space where the faun had been. Then he picked up the torch and flashed it here and there, this way and that, feverishly.

But the faun had gone and there was nothing but silence and darkness about the camp. Clarke turned the torch on the ground. There were distinct marks of cloven hoofprints in the soft soil. "Hypnosis, imagination, dream or fact—which was it?" wondered Clarke as he walked into his tent.

At dawn he was still awake, still thinking. Bainbridge's voice roused him from the depths of Greek mythology.

"You still asleep?"

"No. Had a bad night. Dreams."

"Let's have a wash and then look the place over."

Washing in a small rubber bowl Clarke decided that he would not tell Bainbridge anything about the faun. If the thing existed then they were bound to come across it again, or it them. If it had been illusion then it would be better for Bainbridge to remain in ignorance of the fact that he shared the planet with a man who had hallucinations.

"I slept like a top," said Bainbridge, his face towed to the color of a bright red apple. "Thought I heard you call out once."

"Yes, I went to sleep by the fire and had a dream."

"Well," said Bainbridge, buckling his belt, "are we ready?"

THEY set off into the trees that stretched down the slope of the mountain, and after walking for a while Bainbridge said, "You were right, this really is extraordinary. The similarity of the vegetation. We might be on Earth, almost. The trees are bigger and the grass is thicker and so on, but on the whole the scenery is very much the same."

"Uh-huh."

"You're not very talkative."

"Tired out. Didn't sleep much last night," said Clarke, yawning hugely. But tiredness was not the only reason for his silence. He was keeping his eyes open for the faun, for he was becoming more and more convinced that it had not been imagination or dreams. The hoofprints had been there in the soil when he had been washing earlier, but Bainbridge had not seen them.

They came out of the green silence of the trees into a glade that stretched for about a hundred yards. Clarke stopped in his tracks. "Did you see that?" he asked, softly.

"See what?"

"That," said Clarke, pointing.

"I see nothing. Just trees and grass. Why?"

The faun reappeared from behind a tree. "It's no good," he said, "Your friend can't see me."

Clarke's face was a white sheet and his eyes were black holes in it, staring. "Didn't

you hear anything or see anything?" he asked Bainbridge, still staring at the faun.

"No. What are you talking about, anyway?"

Clarke pointed at the faun again, raising his arm slowly. "Can't you see it over there—standing beside that big tree?"

"See what? Have you lost your senses, Clarke? Snap out of it."

"What did I tell you?" called the faun.

Clarke took a deep breath. "Over there," he said, "is a faun. You can't see it because you're not sensitive. I can see it and hear it. I saw it last night, too. That was when you thought you heard me calling to you. I was talking to the faun. It told me that all the mythological creatures really do exist—all the fauns and nymphs and harpies and so on. They left Earth for Venus when the world started to change and people didn't believe in them any more and stopped seeing them."

Bainbridge nodded. "Go on," he said, helpfully, his hand going down slowly towards where his blaster rested on his hip.

"It told me that since I was sensitive I could see it. And—and I *can* see it. All the creatures are teleports, apparently. That's how they came here to Venus. The faun demonstrated teleportation to me last night."

Across the glade the faun gave a small skipping dance about a tree and then sat down to watch the two men, smiling a small brown smile in its gnome-like face.

"Perhaps we'd better go back to the rocket for a while, hey?" suggested Bainbridge.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"Crazy? Oh, Good Lord, no, I wouldn't say that!" Bainbridge kept his hand on his blaster and shook his head in astonishment at the idea.

Then the faun materialized between the two men.

Clarke watched it, fascinated. The faun was smiling and it was then that Clarke saw the first glow of evil in its eyes. Yes, it was there all right, the age-old evil, a small and brilliant sparkling deep within.

"I tell you what," said Bainbridge. "We'll go back to the rocket and talk it over there. The second rocket will be here pretty soon and if there are any fauns about

then that crew can take care of them, O.K.?"

"That faun is right here beside us now, Bainbridge."

"Yes, that's right."

"Bainbridge, keep your hand away from that blaster!"

Bainbridge was a fraction too slow. Clarke's own blaster was out and leveled. "Don't try it, Bainbridge. Put your hands in the air."

"Now look here, Clarke . . ."

"In the air."

"What are you going to do with him?" queried the faun.

"I want you to lead us to where the rest of you live. Perhaps he'll be sensitive to some of the others, even though he doesn't seem to see you."

Bainbridge gazed at the empty space Clarke was addressing and his eyes rolled like steel blue colored marbles in his head, disbelieving. "You are crazy, Clarke," he said.

"Start walking," snapped Clarke. "No, not up there, *that* way!" he prodded Bainbridge with the blaster. "Remember, don't try any tricks."

THE faun skipped along in front with the two men following behind. And they wound their way through the forests of Venus which were bigger, richer and more luxuriant than those of Earth. They passed great trees like mighty columns of elephant hide, gray and wrinkled. And there were flowers that were sudden bursts of fire and blue frost, exploding in kaleidoscopes of color and then withering even as the men watched, the petals drifting away in clouds of sequins and snowflakes in the morning air.

They walked through grasses that were strong and soft and green; pulpy grasses that were like the emerald tendrils of Terrestrial sea-anemones. And here and there the men saw trees that were tall and white and beautiful. And there were some trees that Clarke looked at especially hard.

The hamadryad waved her arms at Clarke and her voice floated like a soft kiss through the leaves. "Hullo, man," she said, laughing. Clarke bit his lip and prodded Bainbridge. "Did you see anything that time?" he

asked. "Or hear anything?"

Bainbridge sneered. "What should I have seen, the giant Atlas?"

"No, a tree-nymph."

In front of them the faun turned. "Most of us live about here," he said.

"Can you call them together?" queried Clarke, still holding his blaster against Bainbridge's back.

"Well, I can do," said the faun. "But it won't do any good. He won't see any of them, I can tell you that now. He isn't sensitive the way you are. It was people like him that drove us from Earth. The scientific-minded ones, the machine men, the men who turned their backs on the woods and the creatures of the woods and wanted only things they could get their hands on, real things, realities. His sort of people." A brown finger stabbed at Bainbridge. "Now you're different," the faun's persuasive voice went on. "You're more like the old people. You can see us and understand us. Look over there for example."

Clarke looked but kept the blaster steady. A centaur stood in the shadow of a giant tree, watching them. His four strong brown horse's legs were quivering and his fine back tail swished to and fro.

"You can see him," the faun went on. "Men like your companion couldn't see him if they lived to be a thousand. They have nothing in their souls at all. They simply lust for power and material things. Like the Huns and the Goths. No poetry. None."

Clarke watched the forest and saw the beings emerging, while the faun, worked up by his own thoughts and words, glowered at Bainbridge.

There was Pan, picking his way through the trees, playing on his pipes a tune that had in it all of youth and the joys of youth yet was as old as time itself. Here were more tree-nymphs, half hidden in the trees that formed their lives, their hair billowing in shimmers of pale leaves about their heads, their slim bodies melting into the rich brown bark of the trees. Now came a drumming of hoofs. More centaurs; their glossy horses' bodies rippling and glowing. And then, coiling from the black pit of its lair came the serpent that once had guarded the golden apples of the Hesperides, a monster of coils and convulsions, of scaled

head and flashing, forking tongue, of sequin-studded lengths of threshing and heavy serpentine strength.

Oh, they all came, then. The satyrs, brown and ugly with a thousand evils and a thousand lusts grinning in their sunken eyes; the swift wet rising of water nymphs from their silver pools; the shrieking and whistling of monstrous wings as the harpies and the furies weaved in and out amongst the trees. And thus the wood became alive with a thousand rustlings, a million stampings of cloven hoofs, an infinity of whispers and of sighings.

CLARKE watched them and he saw the menace in their faces, the menace and the evil. This was their world and men were enemies, invaders. Whether they were sensitive or otherwise, whether they *saw* or did not see, men were not wanted on Venus. And Clarke's hand tightened on the blaster as he watched Bainbridge, the faun and all the myriad others.

"You see," said the faun quickly, noticing the change in Clarke's expression, "*he* doesn't see them. He's one of the stolid sort. You could stay here with us and we would accept you. But *him*!" The faun spat.

Yes, thought Clarke, the blaster loose in his grasp now. Yes, you want me to kill him, don't you? You can't touch him because you don't exist so far as he is concerned. But you're doing your best to influence me against him so that I kill him, aren't you? And then you'll destroy me.

"All right, Bainbridge. You can put down your hands. I had everything all wrong. These creatures are trying to get rid of us both."

Bainbridge turned round. Clarke handed him the blaster. "You take it," he said.

Bainbridge took the blaster. Clarke watched the faun's face changing, watched the deep and terrible evil crawling over it. "You were right, Bainbridge," he said, speaking quickly. "We'd better get back to the rocket. They can't touch you but they can get me. We must try and get the radio working and contact the second rocket, warn them about the Venusians."

Bainbridge nodded. "That's right, old man," he said. "We'll have to warn them." Then he pressed the trigger on the blaster.

There were tears in the eyes of William Roderick Bainbridge as he put up the little wooden cross beside the others. He straightened up. Poor old Clarke, he thought. Too bad about him. But there had been nothing else he could have done. He couldn't have kept him prisoner and he was too dangerous to have loose when the second rocket came down. He might have done anything. Anything at all. But it was too bad just the same.

He felt amazed at himself for having been able to shoot him so calmly. But he had done his duty. The spacecode laid down rules for emergencies like that and he had followed the rules, however unpleasant it had been. Under normal circumstances, he mused, Clarke had been a decent enough fellow. But that sudden madness showed that he should never have been picked for this business. Far too imaginative. Fauns and tree-nymphs! Teleportation! Bainbridge smiled a little sadly as he looked at the fifth cross.

Oh, well, better make some coffee.

And he walked towards the tent, stepping without a thought, without the slightest hesitation, through the body of one of the fauns who squatted there glaring at him with red and hate-filled eyes.

Steel-blue eyes brightened in the fierce metal face. Fingers that had steel bones kept their hold . . . squeezing.



THE FINAL VENUSIAN

By BRYAN BERRY

That evening. That strange and fateful evening, robot John sat by the fire as he had for one thousand, four hundred and twenty-eight years, four months and three days . . . but waiting now for nothing in the whole world to happen. Nothing at all.

SILENTLY, among the tall and luxuriant trees, the city slept as it had slept for the past thousand years and more upon the planet Venus.

The white towers of the city pointed at the graying sky like skeleton fingers rising from the dead hands of the buildings. Where smaller houses on the outskirts of the city had nestled there were creeping greeneries and exotic plants. Where great canals had channeled across the land bearing water to all the outposts of the Terrestrial colony there were only the white

arms of broken concrete, broken and scarred and crumbled where the trees had pushed themselves up with a great straining and a great heaving, to break through and gasp and rear upwards towards the sky in exhilaration.

The city was a dead city, turning its sightless, ancient eyes to gaze at the creeping bushes and grasses that swarmed over its limbs. And the rains that swept Venus washed its bones and the winds of Venus picked them clean through the long years.

This silent and misty afternoon there was

not a movement to be seen throughout the whole city, but on the outskirts, from a small and crumbled building, came a plume of smoke, rising and curling steadily upwards from a tall chimney.

Within the building the two sat at the table as they always sat at this time of the day, watching the fire burning in the ancient grate as they had done through the centuries since Old Paul had sat with them doing that very same thing. Their faces were without wrinkle, without a line to tell of age or illness or worry. Their lips were fine and red and warm-looking, and their eyes the palest blue steel. On their heads were bushy shocks of hair that never grew long and never needed cutting and never fell out. And in the firelight, teeth that were rows of the finest pearls glistened without a spot of yellow on them, without a mark of decay.

"I wonder when he will come," said the first robot, Thomas.

"Perhaps this year, perhaps the next, perhaps the one after, but it will be one of the three. He allowed a five year margin of error when he entered the Time Capsule. Two of the years have already gone," replied the second robot, whose name was John.

"It seems funny, doesn't it, to sit here knowing that we are going to see him again after so long?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember him as well as I do, I wonder?"

"Of course I do. He made us both the same, didn't he? My memory is just the same as yours."

"Do you remember his white hair and his stoop? His hands yellowed with chemicals?"

"Naturally I do."

"And the way he kept on wearing that old suit, despite the money he made with his inventions?" Thomas went on.

"Of course."

They were silent for a while, then. The fire flickered in the room and gave off its warmth to the two beings who had no need of warmth.

No need at all.

"You know, the only things he never tried to make money on were robots. He

never made any after us, did he?" mused John.

"No, that's true. He didn't. I remember him talking about that, once, too. He said that he didn't mind making robots to be used as servants or even friends but he wasn't going to make them for use as cannon fodder. Do you remember him saying that?"

"Of course I do. It was at nine o'clock on the evening of July seventeenth, 1979. Am I right?"

"You are," said Thomas.

"And that's what would have happened, you know. If they had started making robots like us on a large scale either here or on Earth they would have been made to fight in the war."

Thomas nodded and poked the fire, stirring up a spray of sparks. "Yes, men wouldn't have passed over an opportunity like that. The side with the robots would have won any war at all. And that was why Old Paul wouldn't give in when the government tried to make him cooperate."

John got up from the chair and walked over to the wide window. "How long has it been, Thomas? How long since he left in the Time Capsule?"

"One thousand four hundred and twenty-seven years, three months and eight days."

John nodded slowly. "I often wonder what happened to him, why he never came back. 'I've thought about it more and more since the last colonists died out. We're only animate, thinking beings on Venus now, you know. When Old Paul comes we must stay with him all the time. We must never let him out of our sight, for if we do and something happens to him . . .'"

"We should never forgive ourselves, and we should be the losers."

"Yes. It will be good to talk to him again and remember the days when there were men in the city and rockets in the sky. Think of it. We can have him here for the rest of his life, for he never returned through the Time Capsule. We can talk to him just as we used to."

Thomas got up and joined John at the window. "And we must never let him stray far from us in case something should happen to him," he said.

The two robots looked out together at the dead and skeletal city.

ABOUT a year passed; a year that was to Thomas and John no more than the blinking of an eyelid, for they had known so much of time through the long and silent years.

Within the crumbled building a clock chimed six. John and Thomas pushed back the sheets that covered them and rose from the two beds where they had been lying for seven hours, imitating sleep. They dressed and went downstairs.

"Raining," said John, pulling back the metal curtain and peering outside.

"John," said Thomas, softly.

John turned. "What is it?"

Thomas pointed with a finger that looked human but which, of course, was not. In the middle of the room there was a glowing. A blue glowing and a blue shimmering.

"It's Paul, Old Paul," said John.

The shimmering became a solid egg of blue light, vibrating in the center of the room.

The robots looked at each other happily. "After all these years," said Thomas.

"Yes. After all these years."

They waited, their eyes eager.

Old Paul stepped out of the blue vibrating egg, his white hair just as they remembered it, and his moustache, and—yes—and his old suit with the bottom button missing from the jacket. Just as he had stepped into the Time Capsule on that sunny morning one thousand four hundred and twenty-eight years, four months and two days before, so he stepped out of it.

"Paul, Old Paul," from two metal throats.

"Hullo, boys."

"Paul, you're back. We waited so long."

"I didn't think I should find you still here, somehow."

The robots laughed. "Oh, we're still here," said John. "You made us to last, remember? We're good for another thousand years or so."

The old man sat down in one of the chairs and looked around the room. "You've made some changes. None of my apparatus left here." His voice sounded sad.

Thomas and John shifted their feet. They

knew that the old man was thinking that they might at least have kept some of it there to remember him by.

"We didn't destroy it, Paul," said Thomas.

"Then who did? Did I, after I went back?"

"No, Paul, the Government came and took it away. They thought you might have been working on something that would help in the war."

A mass of wrinkles gathered themselves into a scowl across Paul's face. "And didn't I stop them? Or was it after I died?"

The robots looked at each other undecidedly. Then John said: "You never came back from the future, Paul."

"I never came back? You mean I stayed in the future and died there? Stayed and died here? Now?"

Behind him the Time Capsule reduced itself to a blue shimmering once more, then a faintly luminous patch, then nothing at all. It had gone, its purpose served.

"All we know is, Paul, that you never returned. This is the first time we have seen you since you first stepped into the capsule."

Paul shook his head, bewildered. "But why? The duplicate capsule is still in the vacuum vault below, where I erected it before I went into the future, isn't it? You haven't used it?"

"You never taught us how to use it. It is still there."

"Then why did I not return? I *could* have done. Besides, I wanted to."

Silence in the room.

Old Paul closed his eyes. "So I never went back," he said. "I never finished my work on dimensional ratios or—or anything." He was silent for a moment. Then he shook himself and turned, his eyes open and bright. "Well, boys, you'd better show me Venus. It'll be a lot different from the Venus I knew."

Quietly Thomas led the old man to the window and drew back the metal curtain so that he could see just how different Venus was.

Paul gazed out for a long and quiet minute, his eyes misting and his breath coming more heavily, pumping up from his aged lungs. "It's all like that?" he asked, his

face twisted slightly with the strain of seeing things no other man had ever seen.

John nodded and spoke from behind him. "Yes, Paul, it's all like that now."

Paul still stood at the window, watching the bright whiteness of shattered towers that had become the playgrounds of green and exotic creepers, watching the once glorious roads cracked and splintered with time. "How long?" he asked.

"Many, many centuries it has been like that. About ten years after you went into the capsule a lot of the colonists were recalled to Earth to fight a war. Some of them revolted and were presented with a war dust bomb for their trouble. Those that managed to survive the bomb died off without children. Since then the forest has closed in."

Paul shook his head. "All that trouble, all that money and enthusiasm and energy to get to Venus and they throw the planet away like a rotten apple." And there was a great and terrible sadness in the old man's eyes as he let the metal drape fall back.

THAT night Paul raided the deep-freeze food cached in the vaults below the building and, afterwards, sat in the lounge while Thomas and John busied themselves preparing a meal for their maker, their lord, their master, their friend.

And oh, what a meal it was!

There were plates loaded with lobster salad with fresh green lettuce and prawns as cold and succulent and crisp as curls of pink ice. And there were long cool glasses of beer and slices of white and tender chicken breast; there were plates of warm and crunchy rock cake freshly baked in an oven that had not been used for a thousand years. There were apples and oranges and sweet ripe pears, and there were cheeses, too, soaked in rich wine. The great table groaned and protested and bowed under the weight of the food that was spread out upon a new and stiff white tablecloth, the color of new snow that was laid on top of it.

His meal finished, Paul loosened his belt and reached for a cigar, pierced the end with a cocktail stick and lit up, sighing.

Thomas and John sat in the other two

chairs, cigars burning themselves away, unpuffed at, between their teeth. This was the moment that they had been waiting for through the eternity of years. Yes, this very moment when they could sit again by the fire with Old Paul and speak of things that happened so long ago.

"Do you remember that time when we went to see the Government man and told him that you were not interested in making any more robots like us?" asked John.

Paul nodded, remembering clearly the occasion that, for him, had happened only a few years before. Smiling, he said: "Yes, that certainly was amusing. He was quite taken in when I introduced you as two scientist friends. And then when we left and you and Thomas opened your chests so that he could see what you were—oh, I thought he would die of fright!"

They laughed at the thought, remembering. And they went on to speak of other things, old things, things that happened in the far, far past when the Venusian colony had been a live thing and when there were mighty rockets rushing in the gray skies, burning the clouds with livid streams of fire and bringing more and more men down to the second planet. Ah, yes! the old days; days lost, days gone, days buried.

At last Paul rose to go up to his bedroom, saying good night to Thomas and John from the stairs, leaving them sitting beside the fire still.

"It was good to talk," said Thomas at length. "So good."

John nodded. "Tomorrow we'll take him round the city and then in the evening we'll sit here again and talk."

Thomas looked across, quickly. "I was going to suggest that we take him to the city in the evening and spend the day looking over the old spaceport."

John's plastic and rubber and silk face twisted ever so slightly into a frown. "I think it would be far better if we took him to the city in the daylight. Then we can spend the evening here, talking as we did tonight."

There will be plenty of other evenings when we can sit here talking," said Thomas, standing up. "Why not take him to the city tomorrow evening?"

"Just that I think he'd prefer to see it

in daylight, that's all. There's no need to get cross. If he wants to see the city during the day, then we can take him there the day after tomorrow."

Thomas and John looked at each other across the room, steel wire nerves jumping within them, coils coiling in their metal skulls, lubricating oil stirring and whirling in glass and plastic tubes deep within. Their bodies were hot beneath their clothes and there came a slight humming from tubes unaccustomed to warmth and anger.

"I think," said Thomas, "that we had better go to bed. We can discuss this further in the morning."

PAUL was wakened in the morning by Thomas holding a cup of hot tea, and by John holding a plate of grapefruit.

"Thank you, boys," he said, puzzled at the heat that was coming from them. "You'd better let me take a look at you after breakfast, you're cooking up much more than you should. What's the matter?"

No answer.

"H'mmm. Well, let me just eat this grapefruit, then I'll come down and look you over. That heat is noticeable from here. You'll be scorching your clothes."

The robots left.

Old Paul sipped his tea and his eyes were troubled. He had caught snatches of their conversation late the previous evening, and what with that and the heat of their bodies this morning. . . . He sighed. So they were not perfect; more than that they were imitative. They had once lived among men and the influence had extended over a thousand years. Anger was a thing that he had never instilled into them at the beginning. Jealousy and possessiveness, too, should have been alien to them. But contact with men in those early years must have provided what he himself had not. The ways of men, the old man thought, oh, the ways of men!

He dressed and went downstairs. "Thomas, John," he called.

They came into the room.

"Fetch the case of tools from the vault. I see all the others have gone. I want to have a look at you."

The robots went out and returned, later, with a heavy case.

"You first, Thomas. Take off your jacket and shirt."

Old Paul opened the case, taking out pincers, forceps, files, oil cans, scalpels, fine wires, glass tubes, plastic and rubber coils. "I'm going to put you out for a while," he said. "Then I can have a better look at you." He opened Thomas's chest and switched this, clicked that. There came a faint whirring and sighing, a hissing of expelled gasses as pressures were reduced, as liquids ceased to pump.

Thomas was a dead and silent thing sitting in a chair.

"Why did you never tell us how to do that for ourselves, Paul?" asked John.

"Because when I made you I had faith in the human race. I thought that you would be useful to man after I was dead and gone. I was the only person who knew how to inanimate you. If you were to try it, even after seeing me do it just now, you would fail. Why do you ask?"

"The years have been very long, Paul. Sometimes, sitting here, we talked of the old days when men who did not want to live destroyed themselves, men who had nothing left to live for."

The old man's nimble fingers joined wires, substituted tubes, rearranged tiny fibres, scraped with a scalpel, swiftly. "Have either of you ever tried to disconnect yourselves?" he asked.

"Never. We have always had something left to live for. We knew that you would come here eventually."

The old man smiled. "It means that much to you, does it, my returning?"

"We have had little else to think about for over a thousand years. And now here you are."

"Yes, here I am." The fingers were busy still with wires and tubes. "Yes, here I am again. And you each want me for yourselves, don't you?"

"I suppose we do."

"You know you do. Before, you were prepared to share me with each other. But now it is different. I am too precious a possession, am I not? You each resent the fact that I am not your own personal property. What I am doing to Thomas now will remove that resentment. Afterwards I shall do the same to you. I overheard part of your

conversation last night, and your body heat this morning warned me of what was happening. But it shouldn't take long to put you right."

JOHN laid a hand on the old man's shoulder. "Paul," he said, "Paul, we could get on very well together—alone."

Paul's hands came away from Thomas's chest. Slowly he put the scalpel down on the table beside him, together with the twists of nerve wire on which he had been working. The room was quiet with the silence that held the two figures. "The years have changed you, John," said the old man, "changed you as I never thought they could."

John's steel eyes were glowing brightly, his fingers twitched on the old man's shoulder. "I'm serious, Paul. We could spend the rest of our—of your life here on Venus together—and we would never be lonely, the two of us."

Paul straightened up. "Sit down, John" he said heavily. "I'm going to start on you now. You seem to need it more than Thomas."

John sat down and then stood up again, his face a spider's web of tiny cracks where the internal heat was working on him. Within his metal skull nerve wires rose to maximum temperature and bulbs flashed redly, recording themselves on strips of microfilm winding and curling on miniature spools. But the spools slowed and the warnings did not shoot out to each limb, each part of the metal complexity that was John. Instead the wires rose higher in temperature. Three microscopic valves blew themselves to glass dust within the brain case.

John shot out both hands, gripping Paul's shoulders. "Let's stay together," he said. "We can forget all about Thomas. We don't need him."

"Take your hands off my shoulders."

"No."

"Don't be a fool, John. Sit down. You're cooking yourself to a cinder inside there. And take your hands off me!"

Steel blue eyes brightened in the fiercely working face. Fingers that had steel bones kept their hold, squeezing. "No, no, no, no, no, no! You're mine, mine. You shan't

belong to *us*, but to *me*! We'll forget Thomas and everything. We'll go out somewhere else and build a new house and start a new life, and in the evenings we can sit beside the fire like we used to do, and we can talk of the old days and watch the fire die down. We have no need of Thomas. Let him stay where he is—dead."

The old man coughed twice and pawed at the steel fingers, quite futilely. "John, John!"

Slowly the brightness died away to a glimmer in John's eyes. The heat subsided in the nerve wires, the liquids gurgled to themselves and returned to normal levels in their small and secret tubes, the twitching of metal coil muscles diminished. The fingers opened, then.

Old Paul fell in a crumpled curve on the floor of the building. At the chair beside his fallen body Thomas sat with his chest bared and a trickle of nerve wires cascading from the circular hole there.

John looked at his fingers, then at Paul.

"Paul, *Paul*," he cried, bending. I didn't mean to hurt you, Paul. I didn't mean to do anything. Stand up, Paul. Get up, Paul. Oh, Paul, *Paul*!"

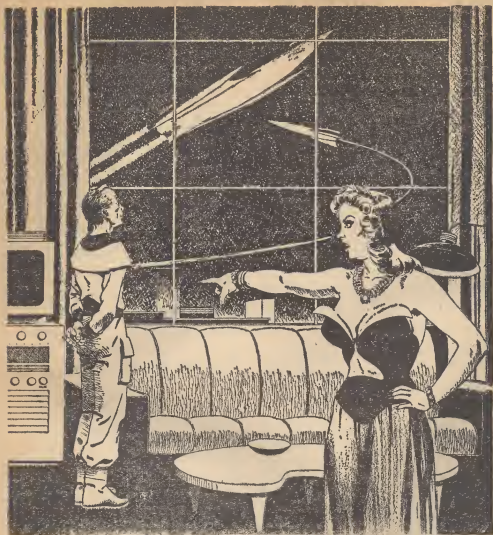
Desperation made a shaking within him, deep down. He pulled the old man upright and carried him to the table. He stripped off his clothes and rubbed his limbs. He went down to the vault and brought up oxygen cylinders and a pump, and for three hours he worked on the old, brittle body that was growing steadily colder. It was no good.

After that he tried to put Thomas together again, fitting nerve wires into place, examining this part, adjusting that. Thomas sat like a metal and plastic, glass and silk, rubber and fibre dead thing, as indeed he was.

John buried the two bodies on the edge of the dead and silent city, among the trees.

And that same evening he sat by the fire as he had sat for one thousand, four hundred and twenty-eight years, four months and three days; but waiting now for nothing in the whole world to happen. Nothing at all.

Oh, to be out there, thought Larry. Out there, way up in space where there would be no one to nag.



GROUNDLING

By BRYAN BERRY

With immense ease Larry could call up scenes of the depths and vastness of space, and the rockets darting like silver humming birds through the eternal dark. For Larry was a groundling . . . a hen-pecked groundling with a daring plan.

“THE way you leave ash about on the carpet, Larry, really!”
He sighed and turned the page of his book, not looking up.

“Anyone would think the autocleaner does everything, the way you go on. Don’t forget I have to work the thing.”

He raised his eyes, then, keeping his fix-

gers in his book. "I'm sorry," he said, simply.

She sat opposite him in the soft cloud-rubber chair, rocking gently back and forth within its soothing pulsations. She was bigger than he was; bigger, fatter, sterner, stronger.

She scowled again. "I think you make more work for me on purpose."

He knew quite well that it would be no use denying it. Through the years since their marriage in 1989 he had come to learn how useless it was to deny any of her accusations.

A rocket roared up from the spaceport beyond the house, but all he heard was a gentle humming; that was all that the soundproofed walls let through. Once he had been able to hear the bellow and the churning of the great silver vessels roaring off for Mars or Venus. Then she had said that the noise disturbed her and had made him have the soundproofing installed.

He pressed the stub of his cigarette into the ash tray and watched the metal arm jerk the tray to the wall, disappear through the tiny hatch and return the tray, empty, clean, polished.

There was another gentle humming as a second rocket passed over. He stretched out his legs and gazed up at the crystal window, watching the blazing trail of red and green fire burning its way through the midnight blackness. Oh, to be out there! Oh, to be through with all this and to be away out in space where there was no one to nag, no one to worry you, no one to tell you not to drop ash on the carpet.

Her harsh voice cut in, severing the dream.

"Do you know you've done nothing all evening except read that stupid book on space travel and look out of the window and sigh? I should have thought you were old enough to have got over all those crazy ideas about being a spaceman."

He looked at her without really seeing her, and started to light another cigarette.

Her eyes grew cold as she watched him, the pupils sharpening to needle points as she glared at his hands fumbling with the packet. "Remember what Dr. Allison said—too many cigarettes are bad for your lungs."

AS HE was employed on the ground staff at the spaceport he was allowed into the Rameses bar. At one time it had been reserved for spacemen only, but the rule had been ignored by almost all of the ground staff anyway, so in the end they decided that they might as well let them in officially.

He sat in his favorite seat in the corner with a glass of beer in front of him. He was waiting for the crew to come in from Mars as they always did, once every month. He knew the exact moment they would land, every time, and always he came to the Rameses to listen to their tales and drink with them. And always, too, he felt the same excitement, the same tenseness before they came in with their gold braid and their fine blue uniforms. How strong they looked! How clean and straight and purposeful! He sipped his beer reflectively and thought back to the last time he had talked to them. What wonderful stories they had had to tell.

The door banged open and in they all came.

There was Peters and Ericson and Mallard and all of them. All tanned with spaceburn, all walking with the strange and careful tread that every spaceman got after dealing with odd gravities and no gravity at all.

Peters waved to him. "Hey there, Larry." He raised his hand acknowledging the greeting.

"What are you drinking? Beer? Fine," Peters ordered beer for them all and they gathered round the table. Some of them looked at Larry with something like pity in their eyes; and perhaps a little contempt, too. Here was a man, their eyes said, who had never been outside this one little world; here was one who had never been up into space or experienced the strange and beautiful weightlessness, never seen the red Martian deserts, never seen the stars hanging like portholes in the velvet midnights without the twinkling of atmosphere. Here was a groundling.

"Where did you go this trip?" Larry asked, eagerly. He knew, of course. He asked only to make them start at the beginning, force them by his questions to describe everything so that he might savor it down

to the last tiny detail, feed on it as you would feed on a five course meal, washing it down with the rare red wine of the spaceman's jargon.

So he sat there quietly, did Larry, listening to the harsh and crackling voices of Peters and Ericson and the others. Their words were conjurations and invocations, summoning visions of red Mars and green Venus, calling up scenes of the depths and the vastnesses of space and the rockets like silver humming birds darting in the eternal dark.

Peters was speaking. "That's the third trip to Mars we've made in succession. Not that I don't like Mars, mind. I do. It's just that I'd rather be off on one of these experimental flights. I hear that they're going to try sending a ship to Mercury soon. I want to be on *that*."

Larry looked up, turning his glass in his fingers. "Mercury?"

"Uh-huh."

"What about the heat?"

"I imagine they'll dish out asbestos suits and land in the Twilight Belt. It should be a wonderful experience."

Larry looked away quickly. Despite the fact that he would not miss these meetings for the world he always felt saddened when he heard the men speak of their next trip.

The evening wore on. He had told his wife that he would be working late interviewing the crew. He told her this each month and, probably because he said the same thing so regularly, she believed him.

At last the rocket crew got up to leave, all except Peters. Goodbyes were said, leather belts strapped on again. Glasses drained and peaked caps set on at jaunty angles.

The door banged after the last of them.

Peters turned to Larry. "Well, old man, how goes it?"

How many times has he asked that question, before, thought Larry? And how many times have I had to give the same answer?

"The same as ever," he said.

"She still goes for you, then?"

"She still goes for me."

Peters chuckled a quiet chuckle to himself, the sound coming softly above the

hum of conversation, above the clink of glasses in the bar.

Larry looked up. "Did you hear that they're trying to relax the law against married men taking jobs on the rockets?"

"No!"

"Uh-huh. There's a bill going through at the moment."

"Well, well, well, I wouldn't have thought they'd do it."

Larry scowled. "Why not? What's wrong with the idea? They didn't try and stop married men flying in 'planes, did they? Why stop them going on the rockets?"

Peters looked at him soberly. "Because, old man. Just because."

"Because what, though?"

"Because rockets are still new. Space is still new. The planets are still new. We're playing at rocketeering, Larry. While we're playing there's no room for anyone with responsibilities."

"You sound like a text book."

"Perhaps I do. It's true nevertheless."

"So you say."

"It *is* true."

Outside the roar of the rockets; bellowing, triumphant in the night. The rockets screaming off into the skies, causing heads to turn upwards; causing people to shudder in their sleep, dreaming; causing small boys, watching from their bedroom windows to gasp and clutch at the metal window ledges tightly, oh, tightly! Always the harsh and majestic tearing sound of the silver ships blasting off and landing to rip the night into a million glittering fragments and cast it up toward the far stars.

"Well, I must be going."

"Yes."

"You're lucky. You can sleep where you want to."

Peters laughed hollowly. "The novelty palls after a time. Sometimes I wish I had a wife."

They got up and paid for their drinks.

"You've got all space for a wife," said Larry as they went out.

AS HE walked from the railcar towards his house the guide lights along the path extinguished themselves behind him with his footsteps. In the porch he whispered his name at the lock and the door

moved aside. He went in.

The house was still. As it should be, he thought. When she knew where he was she didn't wait up. His feet made no sound on the rubber stairs.

In the bedroom, he undressed in the dark and got into bed. The sheets, like a million tiny furry hands caressed him, stroked him, soothing his body, lulling him gently towards sleep.

The voice came from beside him. "You smell of beer."

"I just had one with the boys."

"That's a lie. I 'visored the spaceport. They told me you came off at six. You've been drinking all this time."

"There was a gang in from Mars. I have to talk to them when they get in. It's the same every month."

"I don't believe you. You just use that as an excuse to go drinking."

He lay there with his eyes closed, not thinking about her at all. He felt a movement as she sat up in bed. He knew that she was looking at him in the darkness.

"You won't pull that one on me again, Mr. Larry Miller. *Oh*, no!" she said.

The sheets stroked him gently, persuasively, deftly, lovingly, bidding him sleep. He slept.

It was four days afterwards that he thought of killing his wife. The night he went out to get drunk after hearing that the bill relaxing the law on married men taking spacemen's jobs had been thrown out.

The next morning he remembered very little about his orgy except the fact that he had been planning to murder his wife.

At the spaceport all that day he was picking up pencils, putting them down again, toying with india rubbers, paper clips, autowriters, thinking all the time: How could I have thought of such a thing? How *could* I? I may get fed up with Hilda but I don't want to kill her.

On the way home the thought of killing her was not so unpleasant. After all, he had often thought of how wonderful it would be to be rid of her eternal nagging. Supposing he admitted that he did, in fact, want to kill her, how would he go about it? What method would he adopt?

He was still brooding over it when he reached his house.

"You were in a disgusting state last night," she greeted him. "I wonder you had the nerve to come home at all."

"It's my house. I bought it, didn't I?"

"Don't you speak to me like that, Mr. Larry Miller."

Yes, he thought. Yes, I suppose I do want to kill her.

He planned it that night in his foam bath. He knew, even as he planned it, that he would be successful. It would not be easy, of course. No, there would be plenty of danger attached, plenty of it. But the more he thought about it the more certain he became that he would get away with it.

The following Saturday he took his wife, as always, into town in the beetlecar. In the largest and most expensive store she bought three new dresses and two hats and then they started back, taking the circular road home as they always did on Saturday mornings.

From quite a ways away Larry could see the traffic beams changing to "Go" on the main bridge over the river. The road was as clear and white as an opened roll of bandages. He drove along at moderate speed, waving to the policeman in the control box the way he always did.

The indicator changed to "Stop."

"Brakes!" shouted Larry Miller's wife.

Simulating agony in his voice Larry shouted: "My God! I can't!"

The car swerved, broke the railings and plunged fifty feet down into the river, striking the water even as Larry got his door open.

There was a commotion on the river bank, a shouting and a clanging of ambulance bells, the furious sound of police whistles scouring the cool, fine, morning air.

A police launch picked Larry up and men knelt on him, pumping water out of him. "My wife," he said, feebly. "My wife."

When they fished the car out they found that Hilda Miller was, understandably, dead.

Everyone was very sympathetic about it. Larry was taken to a hospital where he lay in white and antiseptic luxury while reporters, a policeman and an insurance agent spoke to him.

"It was the brakes all right," said the policeman. "Beats me how you ever got as

far as you did without something happening!"

Larry smiled to himself, secretly. The job he'd had fixing those brakes!

ON SUNDAY he went back home, walking, savoring the air.

The plaque had already been delivered when he reached the house. It sat in the mail box, glowing. He picked it up and looked at it, smiling a little. IN LOVING MEMORY OF HILDA, it said, phosphorescently. Below the words there was a three dimensional image of her let into the metal. On the tag he read: WITH THE COMPLIMENTS OF FIRETRAPS, INC. How strange it must have been in the old days, he thought, when they buried their dead instead of putting them in the Firetraps. How strange to have put them under the earth instead of burning them. How odd, too, to have made a ceremony of death, reading words over a body that was dead and was obviously not interested in anything any more.

Inside the house it was still. He walked through each room and slowly, slowly, with each step he took, the feeling of freedom deepened.

In the lounge he looked round and deliberately flicked ash on the carpet.

He walked to the wall cabinet and pressed two buttons. A shelf emerged bearing a large gin and a small bottle of tonic water. She used to say that she liked a drop of gin once in a while. But, of course, it wasn't good for *him*. He drained the glass, pressed the button for another and slumped into a chair to watch the teleshow, thinking again and again how good, how fine it was to be free.

That night he tore down the soundproof screens and opened one of the great crystal windows in his bedroom to let the sounds of the night come in. There were the rockets! The roaring whoosh as they took off, then the silver of fire burning upwards, upwards. And the stars far away, twinkling like demons' eyes in the cold black sea of space.

"At last I can go," he thought. "I can go on the rockets now. I'm not married any longer. I can get a spaceman's job and go

off with Peters and Ericson and the others."

He sighed a deep, soft, contented sigh as he stared out.

The roar of a rocket filled the room

YOU have to have tough nerves and tough lungs to get a job on the rockets. He had neither, they told him at the medical. Oh, they were all so sorry about it. They knew that he had always yearned to be a spaceman. They knew, too, that he was tired of his desk job.

"But there it is, old man. I'm not saying you're ill, mind you. Far from it. It's just that you're not fit enough for space. You'd crack up within a month."

There were a lot of helpful smiles and pats on the back. A lot of kind and helpful men saying kind and helpful things to him. The manager of his office took him aside and told him that while they appreciated his eagerness to go out into space they considered that he was worth more to them all there in his office.

He spent the evening at the Rameses, talking to the barman.

"So they turned you down, eh?"

"Yes, they turned me down," said Larry, taking a deep pull on his cigarette.

"Too bad."

"They said I wouldn't be tough enough for space."

"They certainly need tough men all right."

"Said my lungs weren't tough enough; my nerves, too."

"My!"

"Told me I was more use on the ground staff."

"Maybe they're right."

"Huh?"

"Well, you can't tell."

"No, you can't ever tell, can you?" said Larry, slowly.

"By the way," said the barman, polishing a glass, "I heard about your wife today. Chap in the checking office told me about it all. Too bad."

"Yes," said Larry tiredly, "Too bad."

Overhead a rocket roared. Larry held his cigarette at arms length and gently patted it so that the ashes would fall unerringly into the receptacle below.

War Drums of Mercury Lost

By JOHN W. JAKES

Blackthos, Lord of Mercury's Dorgas, spoke the words: "We can make even the dead march against you." Only then did the stranger from Earth know that the wicked curse of New Dublin—from the mouth of an ancient crone—was ready to be fulfilled.

THEY were riding along a high rocky ridge. Here the wind blew, strong and with a faint trace of coolness, but it could not entirely dispel the scorching heat of the mid-day sun burning like a bloated red eye from the pale blue heavens of the Mercurial heat belt.

Their horses picked a leisurely path around the scattered boulders. Above them, sharp slopes rose to the mountains standing naked in the wind. Below, the hillside dropped away to the floor of the great circular Valley of Nomoon.

Abruptly, one of the riders pulled his mount to a stop. He sat quietly, pulling at the wide loop of gold dangling from his left ear. The wind riffled his flame-scarlet hair, and his long jade eyes swept the valley floor.

There lay the city of Nomoon, a pile of yellow towering stone. The streets were cloaked in dim shadows, and empty. Beyond the city were large buildings made entirely of pale blue glass. Within them, tiny dots of men could be seen hurrying, tending waving frond-like things.

That is my home, thought Tol Shannon, running browned fingers around the loop of gold. That is my home, or is it, really? Six months. I want this to be my home, but I am an Earthman. Outlander. Will they ever accept me as one of them? They haven't, yet. But why?

There had to be some answer. Shannon turned to where the second rider sat atop his horse. He was a native of Mercury, with traditional pale blue skin, an almost triangular head, and faint wisps of blue hair lying straight back on his blue skull. Hardly more than a boy, he was nevertheless a noble personage among the people of the

valley: Kersten XI Borne, son and heir to old Kersten, ruler of Nomoon.

Shannon pulled a cigarette, offering one to XI Borne. The young man shook his head. Lighting his, Shannon inhaled deeply and then spoke.

"Borne, it's been nearly six months since I wandered into Nomoon, just another star drifter. The Shannons have never stayed in any one place a great length of time. But I want to settle here. You know that, I think. The valley is peaceful. There is no endless fight for existence. I want to stay in Nomoon. But I wonder if I can."

Borne laughed and rubbed his horse's neck. "Tol, that's nonsense. What keeps you from staying?"

"I'm a stranger," Shannon replied. "The people are cordial enough. But I'm still a foreigner to them. They distrust foreigners, naturally enough. I want to remove that distrust. What can I do?"

Borne shrugged. "No more than you are already doing by helping us to improve our source of food." He waved a hand at the blue glass buildings winking in the sun far below. The buildings housed vast hydroponic gardens, and since Shannon had come to Nomoon he had helped the people better their crops.

Now Shannon exhaled loudly, throwing his cigarette to the earth. "All right," he said.

Borne slapped him on the shoulder. "For Sol's sake don't be quite so mournful. You'll get along all right. But I would advise one thing. Find a woman. Mate. That will remove distrust rapidly."

"I can't," Shannon said.

Borne frowned. "Why? Are the women of Nomoon distasteful to you?"



Shannon shook his head hastily. "It isn't that. It's something very strange, Borne. When I came into the system, back at New Dublin on Mars, my mother's widwife was an old Martian witch. My mother told me years later that the old woman had murmured something at the moment of my birth, something that caught my mother's attention even through the pain of child-bearing. For some reason, she uttered . . . well . . . a curse."

"Oh," Borne replied softly. The people of Nomoon were by tradition superstitious. What little technology they had reached back to obscure beginnings. It was a matter of custom, of form. Certain things had been done in ages dead, were being done, and would be done in the distant tomorrows. There was no understanding of any but the most simple scientific principles, and even those were regarded in a half-light of dim and ancient magic.

"What was . . . the curse, Tol?" Borne asked, trying to gaze at the sky where the sun flamed fire.

Like something from a dream, Shannon remembered the words and spoke them aloud:

"When a woman holds the webs of stars between her hands, and the living dead are marching from the grave, then shall the house of Shannon fall forever into death." He paused a moment, then went on, "I don't generally believe in such things. But curses have been very prevalent in our family, and they've always worked out. I'm the last Shannon. The curse can only apply to me."

BORNE laughed again but it was forced. "Well, I don't possibly see how dead men could march in Nomoon. And as for women holding stars or whatever, none of ours practice witchcraft." His blue face darkened as he looked to the south curve of the valley where the crags rose to one great peak, on top of which stood a small stone building. "Except, of course, the old sorceress called Ylarna, who has been in that place since time began. No one in the valley visits her, or has ever seen her closely, but she is spoken of as very learned in matters of science. She is truly a dark woman controlling fearful powers."

"I cannot take a mate," Shannon repeated. "I know I should not believe a thing like that, but some things are very deep in men, and can't be easily removed. I must find another way." He straightened himself in the saddle, adding, "We'd better start back."

Borne turned his horse and headed down the slope.

When he had gone only a hundred yards, he stopped, bending his body to listen with the wind. Then he swiveled in his saddle and faced the red-haired man.

"Shannon," he murmured, his voice harsh, "The Drums!"

Shannon looked below to the city. In the great central square he could see a tiny figure beating upon two large hide circles. People were streaming from the buildings, gathering in the open area. The blue glass hydroponic sheds were also emptying, pouring running figures into the city.

"The Drums mean danger," Borne said sharply. "They are never beaten except in times of trouble."

Shannon kicked his horse and plunged down the rocky slope, Borne behind him. They raced down to the valley floor and the horses lengthened their strides as they pounded toward the rising towers.

The Drums were louder now, great beating thunders that rolled across the valley, carried by the strong wind under the burning sky.

They came at last to the square. There The Drums deafened their ears. The naked blue Mercurian beating them with large padded sticks was sweating, his face frozen in worry. The people drew back for Borne and Shannon, who rode up before The Drums. The red-haired man watched the crowd as it milled and jabbered. He smiled sardonically. They had forgotten their suspicion of him for the moment.

"Where is my father?" Borne shouted over the echoing pulse.

Without missing a stroke, the naked man raised one beater and pointed at a tall stone tower. Shannon glanced up and saw a small black knot of men on the topmost balcony.

"Come," Borne yelled, jumping off his horse and hurrying into the lower entrance to the tower. Shannon followed him rapidly. Despite the fear on the part of the people, Old Kersten and his son respected the

Earthman's knowledge, and followed his counsel when it happened to agree with their plans.

The tower was dark and cool as they ran up the winding stairway, emerging at last on the balcony where stood Old Kersten and the city elders. Far below, most of the square was in shadow, but the drummer still beat.

The chieftain stood with his eyes to a crude telescope, peering to the west where lay the Gate, a narrow defile which was the sole entrance to the valley of Nomoon.

One of the elders whispered that Borne had arrived and the old man turned, his rich blue beard slapping ludicrously. Apprehensively he handed the telescope to Borne. He looked and gasped, then handed it to Shannon.

Coming through the Gate was a party of five horsemen, all natives. They were dressed in long black flapping robes. The foremost rider carried a spear bearing upon it a tattered flag of bright red cloth.

"Who are those men?" asked Shannon.

"They are from the valley of Dorgos," replied the old man. "It lies to the west. Many years ago we fought a great war with them, a war which neither side won. Since then we have been enemies, never venturing into one another's territory."

"Perhaps they want to establish peaceful relations once again," Shannon offered.

The elders grumbled at that, and Borne spoke up, "The red cloth they carry is the Banner of Blood, their war flag. They are not on a peaceful mission."

"We shall go to the great hall and await them there," Old Kersten said, moving to the stairwell.

The group of men walked down the twisting stairs in the chill and musty shadows. The drums had stopped, and the voices of the crowd drifted upward.

Perhaps, thought Tol Shannon, if trouble comes, I can show them that I am loyal to Nomoon. In some way I must show them!

The curse from his young days in New Dublin was forgotten as he accompanied the rulers of Nomoon down the twisting staircase to the great hall where they would meet the men of Dorgos who rode under the Banner of Blood.

But the curse was soon to be remembered.

THE vast hall was filled with a ripple of fevered excitement.

At one end, on a high dais, Old Kersten and his son sat. The elders of Nomoon were clustered around them. Shannon lounged on the steps of the dais, lower than the rulers, yet separated from the crowds of blue-skinned men and women lining the sides of the hall.

Shannon smoked meditatively, wondering at the mission of the Dorgos. Old Kersten and Borne kept their eyes on the tall doors at the opposite end of the long chamber.

The ripple of excited fearful talk mushroomed upward, reminding Shannon of the waves on the distant oceans of Deep Neptune. The sound rose and roared and smashed at the walls.

Then the monstrous heavy doors were slowly swinging open, pulled by townspeople from without. A long bar of sunlight splashed along the floor, remaining perfect for a moment, and then shattering under the grotesque shadows of five men.

The hall was still, with only the faint whisper of the wind against the vaulted ceiling.

The five Mercurians strode down the path of sunlight, their black robes rustling, halting at last before the dais, a few feet from where Shannon sat.

The first of the group, carrying the Banner of Blood in his left hand, stepped forward, addressing the ruler.

"Greetings, Kersten, Lord of Nomoon." He did not bow, as was customary.

The old man answered in a strong voice that carried only a hint of contempt, "Greetings, Blackthos, Lord of Dorgos."

The Earthman glanced at the speaker who carried the scarlet flag. Evidently he held the same position as Kersten in his valley. He was much younger however, and his eyes seemed to move constantly. The blue skull was shaven clean of its thin wispy hair.

"What brings you to Nomoon under the Banner of Blood?" Kersten inquired. The people shifted nervously, listening to each word.

Blackthos smiled ingratiatingly. "Not the Banner of Blood, Lord Kersten. That is a

mere formality. The true banner is one of friendship within the hearts of the people of Dorgos."

The old ruler was impassive, but Borne snickered.

Blackthos ignored the thrust. "Lord Kersten, we of Dorgos have a pitiful plight to report to you, our brother, knowing that you and your people will surely assist us."

"Continue," Kersten said coldly.

"Some weeks ago a body from space, some cosmic wanderer, round and hard as the mountains of Mercury, fell into our valley. It brought death, Lord Kersten, burning death that enveloped our land, destroyed our crops and now has infected some of our people."

Radioactivity from a meteor, thought Shannon. He listened attentively to the voice of Blackthos, even as he noted that the doors of the hall were closed. And there was something subtly strange about the men from Dorgos . . .

"We have come to ask you," Blackthos went on, "to allow us to migrate into the valley of Nomoon to escape the burning death."

A whisper of shock rattled through the room. Borne stiffened in rage but Old Kersten had not changed his expression.

"And why, Blackthos," he said, "should we allow you, our enemies, to come into our valley and share its profits?"

"Because," came the reply, tinged with hardness and vicious strength, "you are good and kind."

Borne snorted. "Go back to Dorgos and rot to death, Blackthos!"

"And because," the Lord of Dorgos finished, his voice a sharp sword cutting through the stillness, "if you do not allow us to enter your valley of your own generosity, then we shall come with our warriors and kill you. We shall burn the city of Nomoon and build anew!"

Kersten was on his feet, crying, "Ride out, Blackthos, and be damned!"

BLACKTHOS passed a hand over his shaven blue head and shrugged. His men, carrying no weapons, merely stood their ground.

There was an instant of hesitation in the room, and Shannon seized it. Rising, he

addressed the people, as well as Old Kersten.

"Even if you wished to let the people of Dorgos come in, purely for the sake of being merciful, you could not allow it." Shannon gestured at the five men, emphasizing what he had noticed a moment before. "The people of Dorgos, including these men, carry the mark of the death in them."

The people gaped. For in the dimness of the hall, Blackthos and his men were limned in a pale aura of ghostly gray light, emanating from their bodies.

"They would infect and kill us all. There would be no end." He turned and spoke directly to Blackthos. "Return to your home and make your burial wishes. You are beyond life, beyond help. Do not curse others with your own misfortune."

Angry at the discovery of his secret, Blackthos spat at Shannon. The redhead wiped the spittle from his face. His green eyes closed to slashes in the gloom. He stepped forward and lashed out with the side of his hand, catching the Mercurian in the neck. He stumbled. Shannon stepped back and waited.

But Blackthos motioned his men toward the entrance. The portal creaked open and the sunlight crept in once more. The gray auras were gone.

Blackthos kept his gaze on the dais, but it seemed to take in the crowd and Shannon as well.

"I have asked in peace," he growled wrathfully. "But now prepare. Prepare with your pitiful rocks and clubs. You have no weapons, and we have a power you cannot match. We can make even the dead walk against you. We shall return through the Gate very soon, and this time we shall carry the Banner of Blood in all sincerity. You will wait. Death will come to you; death under the Banner of Blood!"

Snarling his final words, he turned and stalked out of the hall. The room remained quiet as his men followed, and then there came the clatter of hooves on stone, and after that nothing.

Suddenly the hall broke once more into the raging tumult of human excitement. Young Borne spoke to his father in angry shouts.

But Tol Shannon stood peering at the

road of sunlight to the doors. His body felt cold as the stone walls. Blackthos had spoken . . .

" . . . we can make even the dead walk against you . . ."

The curse! Shannon's brain howled, the second part of the curse!

" . . . and the living dead are marching from the grave . . ."

What had he meant? What could he possibly have meant? He rubbed a hand across his face as if to wipe away the thoughts. Still the thing rang through his head like a horrible chant.

He leaped up on the dais, confronting Old Kersten.

"What did he mean about the dead walking against us?"

"I don't know," the old man replied tiredly.

"Will they come? Will they carry through a war?"

"Of course they will," Borne snapped.

"Could they have some strange weapon? Do they know much of science and strange lore?"

"They could have a weapon," Kersten admitted. He seemed straining under some terrible effort, trying to make his mind function properly. The sound of the people babbling their fear was a roaring current of noise all around them.

"But does Nomoon have weapons to combat them?" Shannon queried insistently. "Until today I've heard no talk of war. Do we have weapons?"

"Clubs, rocks, spears," Borne put in, "as Blackthos said."

"Then, by Sol, we've got to make weapons!"

The elderly ruler stared into Shannon's intense eyes and laughed a short jagged laugh. "We do not know how. Do you?"

"No," he replied lamely, "I have used them but I don't know how to make them. I've fought all over the nine worlds but I don't know how to engineer a battle. Perhaps we can throw hydroponic plants at them. That's one thing I can supervise."

"We must organize the men of Nomoon at once," Borne exclaimed eagerly. "Blackthos is willing to fight for his life, and so are we. Our weapons will work. They must work!"

"You want to die, don't you," Shannon stated tonelessly.

"Tell us how we may fight otherwise," Kersten said bitterly. "Tell us."

Something fell into place within Shannon, a memory. "Yes, I have a suggestion. Perhaps it is not good, but we can at least try. Borne, earlier today you told me of the old sorceress who lives in that stone house in the mountains to the south. What was her name . . . ?"

"Ylarna," muttered Borne.

"Yes, Ylarna. You said she had knowledge of scientific matters. We can go to her. Perhaps she can help us to make weapons."

Kersten's face was pale. Ages of superstition and dark legend was welling up within him. "What are you saying, Earthman? She is a witch, accursed! She knows things no living being should have learned! She cannot make weapons. She can only make demons! We will not go to her!"

"Are you afraid?" Shannon asked. "I will go to her for you."

Borne seized Shannon's arm, held it in a biting grip. "No man of our valley will go to Ylarna! We will rise or fall by our own strength. We will not be eternally damned by a woman who is mistress of darkness!"

"I said that I would go for you," Shannon repeated.

Borne's voice was a roar shouting the babble of the crowd to silence. "I told you that we of Nomoon would not go. Ylarna is ancient and evil. Make your choice. Are you one of us, to live and die as we do? Or will you still seek her aid?"

Shannon looked out over the faces of the people staring up at him from their triangular blue heads. These were his people. He had wanted it that way.

"Well?" said Borne.

Despite the curse, Shannon knew what his answer must be.

"I will stay with you."

. . . and go secretly to Ylarna to seek assistance, he finished to himself.

A ragged smile slipped over Borne's blue face. Shannon did not like lying, but what else . . .

Kersten speaking to his subjects cut off his thoughts: "The women will go to their homes. The men will remain here. We must begin to plan."

In a few moments the hall had emptied save for the warriors. They seated themselves on the floor.

Kersten began his directions. "We may expect an attack on the Gate in not less than three days hence . . ."

Sitting on the chilly stone, Shannon remembered New Dublin.

" . . . and the living dead are marching from the grave . . ."

Perhaps the dead would be marching to, instead of from the grave. Perhaps, if there was no help from the sorceress Ylarna, the dead would be the people of Nomoon.

II

TWO days and nights slipped by under the furnace of the Mercurial sun. Shannon watched the men of Nomoon making clubs and spears and rude hatchets from the stones lying about the valley floor. He helped them, even as he waited for a chance to slip away to the high crag where Ylarna lived. But there was always one of the elders near at hand watching. They distrusted him more than ever, now that word had spread of his outburst in the great hall. Even Borne watched him covertly at times.

Old Kersten set guards watching the Gate. Two great drums would be beaten when the approaching forces of Blackthos were seen. Two days of toil, and the city settled down to wait for the coming of the Banner of Blood.

Shannon's opportunity came on the evening of the second day. A meeting had been called by Old Kersten in the central hall. But Shannon dismissed the messenger, feigning illness. Quickly he mounted and rode away.

Through the empty streets he clattered. Overhead the sky was a moonless bowl of gold-strung shadow. Behind the walls of the city, Shannon knew, there were men and women shivering, sighing softly and waiting for the first beat of the drums from the Gate.

Out across the valley floor he rode, not daring to think of the consequences should he be caught. Up the steep slopes to a narrow deserted pathway. And still higher, until the stars were close above, and the city was lost in the pit of night below. His horse

blew plumes of grayness into the high cool air. Above were no more crags. Ahead, at the end of the narrow trail, stood a small stone house.

He dismounted and walked toward the dusky doorway. His hands were sweaty as he pulled nervously at the loop of gold in his left ear. What kind of a devil-crone would she be? And could she help? She must help!

"I watched. I knew you were coming, Tol Shannon."

The voice came from the doorway where something seemed to move. He marveled at the softness, the gentleness of the voice. Remarkable for such an old woman.

"You . . . watched?" he repeated woodenly.

"And heard. Yes. Enter the house of a . . ." The voice paused, and the next word carried within it a bitter smile. " . . . a witch."

He strode to the doorway, brushed aside a curtain, and entered a simple, plain room, lit by an oil lamp. There was a workbench cluttered with apparatus along one side. He recognized it as highly complicated machinery, but most of it was in fields apart from hydroponics. There were no other furnishings.

Only Ylarna, the witch.

He drew in a sharp breath.

She was young! And yet, she was not young. Her face and body were almost too perfectly formed in beauty to be human. And her eyes were different universes. In them Shannon could read all the birth and death, all the pain and cruelty and truth of a million dead years of stars.

She smiled half-shyly. "I admire you for coming."

"You know why I am here?"

Assenting, she pulled aside a large radiation stove. There was a crystal screen imbedded in the wall, blank and gray.

"A viz circuit," Shannon wondered. "Then you do know science!"

"Yes, I do. I am not a demon as the simple people of Nomoon say, but my science is far advanced from even that of the present modern system. I have been working for four hundred years. My father was a life-chemist. He experimented to increase my life span to nearly eight hundred

years. Since he died, I have done nothing but work here. It . . . it has been very lonely."

Instinctively Shannon felt drawn to her. Her beauty was something that could not pass away. It was near to the beauty of . . . of a god. She saw his thoughts and said, "Because you have come to me, the first in four hundred years, I will help you. When you don't require food or sleep, and when you are regarded as a fearful legend, time grows heavy, even when you work as I do."

"All right," Shannon murmured inanely. It was so laughably simple. He believed her. There was no question of that.

"You know the situation, then?"

"Certainly."

"What is the weapon of the Dorgos?"

She gestured to the gray screen. "Watch there." Pressing switches in the workbench top, she brought a scene into focus.

It was a burial ground. The black-robed men of Dorgos were digging open the graves under the light of flaring torches. One of the Dorgos would climb down in the open grave and attach a round metal disk and chain about the neck of the decaying corpse. And then, the pale blue corpse would rise, slowly, slowly, the dirt falling away and bits of rotten flesh breaking free. But the corpse would rise and climb from the grave and move to take its place in a line of corpses, where naked eyes stared unseeing at the guttering lights.

It was the prophecy! The curse! "Turn it off," Shannon choked. "It makes me sick."

YLARNA threw the switches and the screen blanked out. "It is not a pleasant thing to watch. They have been doing that for two days. Already they have a very large force."

"Can those . . . things . . . fight?" Shannon wanted to know.

"Not really. They can move forward, but they cannot be stopped by weapons of any kind."

"How do they make them move? How can they make the dead live?"

"They don't live at all. The Dorgos are more advanced technically than the folk of Nomoon. Blackthos allows experimentation with science so long as is beneficial to his regime. One of their technologists hit upon

a very simple principle, as yet unknown to most of the system scientists. Blundered into it, really. They still don't understand why or how the machine began to work. But it will focus cosmic force-beams on inorganic matter, giving it some properties of organic life: forcing it into motion, and making it capable of stimulation to obey simple orders. The Dorgos dug up their graveyards, and as long as they keep the ray generator operating and transmitting impulses via the disks they have an invincible army. It can trample the natives to death, or frighten them to madness."

"I don't understand it very well," Shannon fumbled. "I did a little university work in hydroponics. Cosmic force-beams . . . ?"

"The energizing, life-giving rays that maintain being in stars. They're a kind of ultimate life-force holding the universe chained together. That is very crude, but you would understand little more."

"Yes, I understand. But what can we do to stop them?"

"I could build a similar focus beam, which can either activate dead matter, or be reversed to burn out their beam, causing the bodies to collapse and become inorganic once more. With the time I have had to experiment, it is relatively easy. I could have helped Nomoon at any time. But . . . I was afraid to go to them. I know so little of their thought-processes. You had courage to come." Her eyes were gazing somewhere beyond him.

Afraid! he thought. This magnificent woman afraid! Nearly immortal, working with strange new branches of technical endeavor, as simply as most women did their menial tasks. Afraid, this being who could control the very life powers binding and chaining the universe together. Afr . . .

He knew then with certainty that the walls of circumstance were closing:

" . . . when a woman holds the webs of stars between her hands . . ."

Roughly, he moved forward, touching her shoulders clad in a pale green robe, smiling strangely as his eyes danced in the light of the oil lamp. He looked deep into her immortal face.

"Destruction," he murmured, and kissed her.

After that, they worked hurriedly. He

helped with manual tasks, welding small sections of the machine together. Her hands danced whitely over coils and joinings. Shannon felt jubilant.

There was the curse. But they could stop the armies of Dorgos, and that would prove his loyalty to Nomoon. And he had Ylarna now. Not once did they look beyond the curtained doorway of the house. Shannon listened for the sound of the warning drum from the Gate to the west, but the world of Mercury remained silent. Ylarna worked rapidly, glancing at him occasionally, brushing his hand as he handed her a piece of equipment.

Hours went by unnoticed, and finally Ylarna brushed back her dark hair and said, "Finished. We will ride across the valley to the Gate. We must avoid detection."

"When the Dorgos are conquered," Shannon told her, "what is there for us? I am afraid of you. But I love you."

Her smile was warm. "I can make you as I am, Tol Shannon, for I know the secret. I can teach you the keys to make the universe open for you. We can have many wonderful children."

"We can't speak of that now," he said quickly. "We must go to the Gate!"

He hefted the small metal cube with dials and toggles on one vapid face. Ylarna pushed the curtain aside and they stepped out into the hot morning sunlight. She mounted behind him, carrying the lethal machine, and he sent the horse down the steep pathway. The city of Nomoon seemed peaceful far below.

Rounding the final bend to where the path widened out, Shannon jerked the horse to a stop.

There was a stone spear-point pressing against his belly.

III

BEHIND the spear was Borne, and beyond him a small body of armed mounted men.

"The messenger saw you leave the city when you pretended sickness, Tol Shannon," Borne said. His voice was contemptuous. "We followed. You chose this, instead of honor and duty to Nomoon, which you professed to love."

Shannon sat still, wondering if he should bolt his horse free.

"Do not attempt to escape," the young man said coldly. "You will return with us to the city, the woman with you. When the trouble with Dorgos is finished we will execute you both. I warn you, any feats of witchery by the woman will result in your death."

"I will do nothing," Ylarna proclaimed.

"Listen to me, Borne," Shannon pleaded. "I know what the Dorgos will bring against you. You can't imagine it, or even hope to win against it. We can destroy the weapon . . ."

"Nomoon rises or falls by its own power!" Borne snarled.

"Then you will die a hundred million deaths, you insane idiot!" Shannon shouted back. "You're nothing but a blind, ignorant . . ."

Borne howled his rage, and the spear raked down Shannon's face. The Earthman felt the blood trickle into his mouth. Ylarna clutched his waist, the metal machine held between them.

With the Mercurians riding like blue statues all about, they returned to the city in a ring of spears. Ylarna for all her wisdom and beauty was like a little child getting her glimpse of the adult world.

Well, thought Shannon, I tried. The curse of New Dublin, from the mouth of an ancient hag.

The people lining the dim streets cowered in fascinated fear as they rode by. The men watching the procession were armed with their pitifully inadequate clubs and spears, undoubtedly confident of victory.

Old Kersten stood on the high balcony of the tower, frowning down at Shannon and Ylarna. She was still clutching her machine. They were herded inside the tower, then below ground to the dungeons.

Borne locked them in a heavy-doored cell, and stood back, wondering at Shannon's degraded actions.

"You were once my friend," he said, confusion flitting on his triangular blue face. Ylarna crouched in the corner, holding the box, which Borne had overlooked as a useless sort of charm, in his whirling thoughts of betrayal and the battle to come.

"I am not the friend of imbeciles," Shan-

non spat. "I am not the friend of slaving, fear-haunted . . ."

"Your curse, Tol. That is superstition."

"The curse," the redhead replied morosely, "has come true."

Borne started to speak again, but halted, listening.

From above ground came a shivering beat.

The Drums from the Gate!

Borne raced for the stairs.

Shannon shouted after him, "When Blackthos pins you to the earth with the Banner of Blood, remember us. When the dead men are coming, remember us. When . . ."

He stopped. The dungeon was silent, except for the echoing ghostly cry, "... remember us . . . remember . . . us . . . us . . ."

Wearily he sank down to the floor. Ylarna touched his cheek. "I can be killed, Tol Shannon. Will they kill us?"

"I thought they might. Now there won't be anyone left to kill us." He stood up. "I tried to help them, Ylarna. I did want to help them. And now they're marching to the Gate. They can't stop Blackthos." Listening to the distant thunder of the Drums, he slammed his fist against the heavy door, choking, "And neither can we."

Shannon stood for a long moment, pain beating up his arm from his fist. That door, that door. He had to open it!

Savagely, he whirled on Ylarna.

"I am sorry," she was saying. "I do not know much of the world of men. I have observed them, but I do not understand their behavior at times. Our capture . . ."

"... was my fault," Shannon answered bitterly. "I should have taken precautions. But we've got to get out of here." He pointed a finger at the metal box on the floor. "Can that get us out?"

"No."

"It's got to!" he yelled.

"Tol Shannon," she began in a pleading voice.

But her thoughts died unspoken. His face had gone slack, and he was whispering hoarsely, "Inorganic . . . inorganic . . . to organic . . . by Soll!"

"What are you thinking?" she asked quickly.

"Ylarna, the machine you made can burn

out the beam activating the corpses of Blackthos. But you said . . . it could also activate inorganic matter into organic, give it movement and direction! You told me that, didn't you?"

"Yes." Eyes wide.

"Turn it on the door!" Shannon breathed.

"Give the walls of this room life . . . and make them move!"

"I . . . I don't know if it will work," she complained, and Shannon sensed that she was somehow terrified, experimenting here in the world of human beings.

"Turn it on and try!" he bit out.

She set the metal box in the center of the floor, adjusting dials and toggles on one face. Shannon felt sweat running down beneath his armpits. Down . . . and down like the blood from the men of Nomoon trampled under the horde of lifeless things.

"Faster!" he snarled.

Her fingers leaped over the controls. Finally she stepped back and moved close to him, watching.

There was no light, no sound, no sign of functioning from the machine. But after a moment or two, the walls of the cell began to . . . crawl!

Shannon could think of no other word to describe it. The walls retained their previous stationary positions, but they pulsed and twitched and writhed, struggling as if from a searing heat of life burning up out of their bowels.

"Now," Shannon said in an awed voice, "make them part. Make them separate!"

She murmured her fears once more.

"Do it!" he commanded.

"They will split," she said weakly.

Suddenly the tiny room was filled with a great groaning and grinding noise, as if the delicate balance of weight pressing down from above had shifted.

The cell door, now an unbroken mass of flaccid grayness, was splitting down the center.

SEIZING the machine and pulling Ylarna after him, Shannon raced down the corridor. The groaning of the building was much more intense.

Running for the stairway, Shannon felt a sharp object strike his arm, and heard Ylarna's frantic voice behind him, "The

life in the walls! It has weakened the tower. Collapse . . ."

"Up the stairs!" Shannon cut her off above the mounting rumble. "Don't speak!"

Pushing her before him, he took the stairs in long leaps, holding tight to the precious box. The stone corridor was shaking, and rocks fell more rapidly, breaking free of the walls.

They clambered over a pile of stones at the top of the staircase. Ahead lay the square of sunlight that was the door. Over the rumble Shannon heard the sound of the Drums, mingled with the frightened shrieks of women and children in the city, driven to fear by the vision of the tottering tower.

Desperately they struggled toward the door, amid a deadly shower of falling stones. One large piece of rock struck his shoulder and bounded against Ylarna's neck. He felt her clutch at his arm and fall to one knee.

She could not rise. Pain from a twisted leg lashing across her lovely face. Frantically he pulled at her. There was a rushing flurry of sound and he glanced up. The ceiling was beginning to buckle. It tumbled lazily down toward them.

A part of him seemed to watch the scene from some abstract position. To die, only a few yards from the doorway . . .

Ylarna pulled her hands free, and shoved against his body with all her strength. He stumbled backwards, off balance, feeling his back strike the doorway and careen dizzily beyond.

From within the tower he heard Ylarna screaming above the roar of falling rock, "Shield the machine!"

Dumbly he realized that he was stumbling backward off balance, and that he could not prevent a fall. He clutched the machine to his chest as he toppled. His head struck the stone and darkness came fountaining up. His last thought was of Ylarna, crushed beneath the collapsing tower of stone.

IV

WHEN he awoke, he was still on his back, and the box rested safely on his chest. Sunlight burst through his eyelids and he got carefully to his feet, too disorganized to think properly. Instinctively, though, he

set the machine down in a clear space and looked about.

The Drums were still, but he heard the hysterical gibbering of women. The tower was a tall, roughly conical pile of rubble, fallen almost perfectly inward, strangely symmetrical as it pointed toward the sun.

Shannon staggered to the mass of ruin, pulling aside one small stone as he shouted, "Ylarna! Ylarna!"

Something writhed from the pile. A once-white woman's arm, now gray and bruised. He could see part of a shoulder, and a little of her face through a tiny opening where she was buried quite near the ground. And he heard a weak voice as if from infinitely long stone crypts:

"Bring the machine . . . death is near . . ."

He began to claw at the rock in a futile attempt to free her. The voice cut in once more, and it was full of the power of four hundred years of magnificent life. "Bring the machine!"

He set it down near her hand. That hand, stained now with a glistening stream of red blood, leaped over the toggles and dials. It seemed to Shannon some surrealistic nightmare; the great conical pile of stone under a swollen sun, and the slim stained arm reaching forth to caress a metal cube.

The voice came again, "Take the box and ride to the Gate. I have activated the shorter beam to destroy the power of the corpses. Perhaps the dead men ate already . . . through . . ."

"I'll dig you out," he choked, tearing at another rock.

"No!" Her speech, though sharp and full of authority, was filled with a muffled slowness. "I know why you want to do this. But you must not remember me as you ride to the Gate. There is more destruction there than here under a pile of stones. Forget the smaller death. I do not feel . . . sorry . . . four hundred years . . . "She seemed to grope for air.

He stood stock still. Then he bent, slowly picking up the box, full of immense sorrow, but knowing the way.

"I'll go," he whispered.

The hand moved weakly, conveying in one gesture more love than a thousand written books. Shannon touched his lips to the white hand, and rose, turning his back

on the fallen tower.

Across the square were huddled the women of the city, peering at the wreck and speaking in jabbers.

Shannon ran to them, carrying the machine, and called for a mount. They moved like dumb cattle, shifting their feet, and he shrieked from bloody lips. One crept away and returned with a horse.

A short time later he was thundering out of the city toward the Gate, holding the machine, knowing it sent its magic beam toward the now-silent Drums of destruction.

The Battle of the Gate was long remembered in Nomoon. The warriors were struggling against a steady tide of advancing moldy things; struggling to quench the screaming that wanted to bubble up in them; they quenched it with the thought that they were fighting for existence, and returned to the fray somewhat strengthened. But they were being slowly pushed back, trampled under musty, dead feet. Behind the line of naked-eyed things, Borne and his father could see Blackthos riding leisurely with his followers. Blackthos carried the Banner of Blood, and the beam-generator activating the corpses lay on his saddle. The square metal cube, however, was a mystery to Borne. But he understood all too well the smile of triumph of the Lord of Dorgos.

The men of Nomoon swung at the dead things with rocks and stone hatchets, but still they came. With terrible rapidity, first one and then another of Nomoon's warriors shouted and fled slobbering insanely as the walking horrors kept moving on. The Mercurial sun broiled calmly.

Old Kersten and Borne swung their weapons side by side, but both were aware of the impending defeat. Both were aware of the madness rising within their own brains.

And then the dead men began to waver, teetering crazily and stumbling to the ground, almost as one. They did not move, even as Blackthos and several of his technologists struggled with the machine, twisting the controls in confused bewilderment.

The men of Nomoon rallied forward, their minds miraculously cleansed of the seeping rot of madness.

Borne clutched his father's shoulder and gestured. Across the valley floor came Tol Shannon, with blood smeared upon his face,

and a box similar to that of the Dorgos on his mount's back. He was kicking the horse to a frenzied gallop.

Through the lines of Nomoon went Shannon, pausing only to set the box securely behind a small boulder. Then he rode toward Blackthos, who was vainly trying to collect his men, disoriented and baffled by the failure of their crowning, supreme weapon. Behind Shannon came the vengeful hordes of Nomoon.

Borne did not stop to wonder of Shannon's escape, nor of the witch woman. His arrival had coincided with the fall of the corpses. That was enough. He raced forward with the rest, who battled with the ferocity born when men are fighting for their women, their homes and their mode of living.

The Battle of the Gate was short after that. The Dorgos died rapidly, surprised and cringing, minds distorted by their legion's collapse.

And in the middle of the holocaust, as Nomoon swept to victory, Tol Shannon sought out Blackthos, the object of all his collected hatred against the forces that had destroyed Ylarna. He seized a stone bludgeon. Blackthos stabbed at him with the tip of the Banner of Blood, but Shannon carried in him the thousand strengths of hate. Tol Shannon pulled the struggling Blackthos to the ground and beat his brains into a dark sticky mash.

V

SHANNON turned away from the square marker by the little house. Beneath the marker were buried the tattered remains of Ylarna. He could not cry even a little. Since the battle, emotion was squeezed and drained from his body.

He walked down the narrow path to where his horse stood quietly. The wind whipped against him and the stars were glittering eyes peering from a far black world.

Borne waited, too, holding a flaring torch.

"I buried her," Shannon stated flatly.

Mounting, the two men proceeded down the slope. Finally, Borne said in a fumbling manner, "I can scarcely ask forgiveness for the wrong done to you. A man, or a people, who behave as mindless slugs do not deserve

forgiveness."

Almost not hearing, Shannon kept his eyes across the valley, to the Gate, where huge flaming bonfires reached into the stars. The men of Nomoon were burning the bodies of Dorgos, corpses and radioactive humans alike, removing forever the taint of death from the valley. Shannon felt sorry, somehow, for the women and children of Dorgos, waiting somewhere for news of victory, but he realized that a sick man does not really wish to infect others with his disease. He only thinks such thoughts occasionally. The Dorgos had been a large organism, a whole social structure. What man did want to die? He even found himself feeling faintly sorry for Blackthos. But then he remembered Ylarna.

"The curse did come true," he said in a hollow voice, unconsciously speaking his thoughts. "... the house of Shannon shall fall forever into death..." Truth, for I am the last of the Shannons, and we would have mated, and children would have come. Now..." His earlier pangs of pity for the Dorgos vanished. He was again empty.

"Please," said Borne, "let me speak."

Shannon turned and Borne saw the jade eyes stabbing into his. To Borne, the man's face seemed like one of the corpse-army. Emotion was scorched out, and only the loop of gold joggled brilliantly in the torch

light.

Borne fumbled for words. "We . . . of Nomoon . . . once, Tol, you said that you had to prove yourself to us. Now, my father, myself, and the people, are in your position. We must prove ourselves to you, make ourselves worthy to call you brother. We owe you more than poor words can express. We owe you life, and that cannot be measured in words. But give us a chance to repay you. Please, Tol, give us a chance!"

His earnest voice was stilled, and there was only the clatter of the horses and the sighing of the wind as it whipped the torch into long orange ribbons of flame.

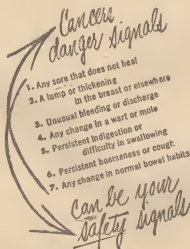
Within Shannon rose one emotion, that he, as well as any living man, could never quite put down. Love was gone, yes. But he could belong to the valley of Nomoon, and could work for them and with them and be their brother, and perhaps he would not always be a dead and empty shell.

"Give us the chance, Tol!" Borne repeated.

Shannon watched the fire streaming from the torch in the wind.

"All right," he said.

Together, the red-haired Earthman and the blue-skinned warrior of Mercury rode slowly down the hill, to the city of Nomoon lying quietly under the golden eyes of the universe.



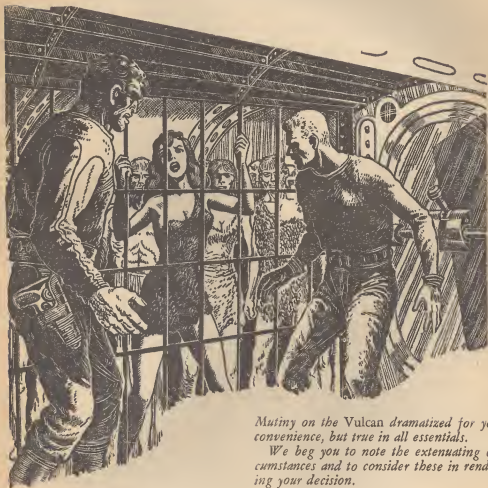
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AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY, INC.

THE SUN-DEATH

By STANLEY WHITESIDE

Captain Lodar's compelling urge to return to Earth was like the instinct of a dying animal for its lair . . . to die with its kind. Nothing would stop him . . . nothing except death. And the death of the soaring Vulcan would be his swan song to space.



Mutiny on the Vulcan dramatized for your convenience, but true in all essentials.

We beg you to note the extenuating circumstances and to consider these in rendering your decision.

*Respectfully yours,
Haley, Cronk, & Touchwife,
Attorneys at Law.
per Jonas Cronk, LLD., MSL., PhD.*

*Norport, U.S.A.
November 2, 2268*

*Honorable Board of Space Navigation,
Section 6.*

Subject: 6B-5

Gentlemen:

In support of a petition on behalf of our client, we herewith submit a report of the

THE Spaceship Vulcan lay on a tangled mat of vegetation. A thin haze of blue smoke drifted over it from the nearby Venusian village where several of

the grass huts were afire. Under the bulging side of the ship twenty of the crew were boisterously herding a group of Venus Mutes, forcing them into the entrance port of the hold. There was very little trouble; only one of the Mutes balked, and a sting ray soon quieted that.

In the glittering control room of the ship Ray Burk, Navigator Unlimited, turned from the viewport with a frown.

"It seems a pity to burn down their shacks," he muttered.

He was a large young man with blond hair, carelessly dressed, yet still bearing that touch of alert authority characteristic of a crack spaceship man. Since it was his first trip on the *Vulcan* he was still a little out of place—not that he and Captain Lodar didn't understand each other.

Lodar, pacing restlessly back and forth, made no reply. His black eyebrows merely lifted sardonically as he continued his heavy strides. It was typical of Lodar, whose vast energy kept him ceaselessly active, but in the confines of a ship it was like being caged with a lion.

Ray turned back to the viewport. The village, burning sluggishly was desolate beneath the long column of smoke that rose in the still air.

Lodar's strides halted at the magnaflux, he twirled the detector impatiently. "Still clear," he muttered. Then, louder, "Fix a course for Earth, Burk. As soon as all are aboard, we'll take off."

Ray glanced quickly at Lodar, surprised at the sudden change of course, but he said nothing. This was Lodar's last flight, if all went well he was through. Perhaps that was why he was so savagely nervous. After all, it was time he quit. Luck had been with him overlong.

The interphone jingled and Lodar answered it.

"All right, Campora," he said after a moment, "get set for takeoff. Then report up here to me." He turned to Ray. "Take off, Mister. Make it snappy!"

Ray checked the safety lights, then signaled for power. He hoped McVane was sober. The sad-faced little engineer just couldn't stay away from his bottle.

But McVane was at least sober enough, for the metal floor began to throb gently

as the converters on the lower deck groaned to life. While the machines built up to speed Ray adjusted the drive for a sixty degree lift. He could hear the soft grate of the Benson Plates shifting on the outer hull.

THE interphone tinkled and Ray heard McVane's broad accents. "Ye can rip the bottom off her, Mister!" Yes, McVane was drunk again. He'd been out in the space rays too long perhaps, but the indicators showed him on the job.

Ray closed the ether drive and the ship rose silently as if caught on an elevator belt. He set the course carefully, aware of Lodar at his elbow, watching. If the Captain would only watch McVane as he did the others, things might be a lot better.

Perhaps Lodar was afraid for the hoard of jewels which was rumored to be aboard. Ray had heard whispers of this wealth, but he doubted that Lodar would fear any man, much less the space rats aft. Why, he could whip any ten of them!

Still, it might explain the sudden change in plans. Originally the *Vulcan* was destined for Mars where the load of Mutes would be sold to the zoos. Lodar's decision to head for Earth was unexpected, as unexpected as so many of his brilliant moves.

Ray had cut in the autopilot when the bulkhead door swung open to admit Campora. The First Mate still wore his rubber marsh boots and a gun slung on his narrow waist.

"A fine haul, Captain." He touched his dark mustache and a grin slit the fallow face. "About fifty Mutes." Then his grin faltered as he saw the Captain's expression.

Lodar faced him with huge fists balled on his hips.

"Who the hell gave you permission to set fire to that village, Mister?"

Campora's brown eyes darted once to Ray as if for support. His lean hand covered the black mustache. "Just a little fun for the boys, Captain." The Mate's voice was placating. "We—"

"Fun, eh!" Lodar's eyes were narrow as he thrust his heavy face forward. "If there's any fun to be dispensed, I'll do it! Do you morons realize that the smoke will alert half the patrol ships in space?"

"I—I'm sorry, Captain." Campora backed

away. "You see—"

"Shut up!" Lodar jerked his dark head.

"Take over from Burk."

Feeling sorry for the cowed mate, Ray relinquished his controls and gave the course. Campora stared.

"But—I thought we were to head for Mars!"

"I changed that," Lodar interrupted impatiently.

"You never told us!" Campora looked excited. "You agreed that we'd never head for Earth without warning. You know the men won't stand for it!"

"Yes, they will!" Lodar eyed the mate steadily. "Tell 'em they needn't worry, I'll look out for them."

"There'll be trouble!" Campora snapped.

"Is that a threat?" The big man's voice was icy. Then, as Campora subsided mumbling, Lodar turned abruptly to Ray.

"You can come with me, Burk, if you want to look at the cargo."

As he headed for the exit Ray followed curiously. It was the young navigator's first trip to Venus and he'd never seen a Mute close at hand. Which was strange, since his own past was so inextricably tied up with them.

Ray had served five years with the Mar-Venus Company to earn his unlimited navigator's ticket on the Mars passenger flights.

This company was chartered "to develop and exploit the planets of Mars and Venus" and most of its wealth came from the exploitation. For years Venus Mutes had been captured and sold to zoos or to wealthy people for pets.

The practice was strongly condemned by humanitarian groups on Earth. This became so vociferous that, finally, the Earth Federation halted all flights to Venus regardless of charter.

The Company declared such law was illegal. It would send a ship to Venus and have matters settled in court.

At this time Ray Burk was due to command his first ship. He was offered the Venus flight—the breaking of law to be merely a step in establishing precedent, so they said. It sounded like high adventure, with himself carrying the ball. He gladly accepted. And, as expected, he was intercepted by an Earth patrol ship.

But in the ensuing legal battle the Company found its very charter jeopardized. It hastily switched tactics, disclaimed all knowledge of the flight, and said Ray had set an incorrect course. Even hardened politicians smiled at such a thin excuse, but the Company made it stick. Ray lost his navigator's license. He was through.

The Company even went further in order to clear itself. It righteously promised to limit the capture of Mutes and save them from extinction. In fact, it offered to patrol Venus and stop illegal raids by others.

Then the price of Mutes rose to fantastic heights. Poachers moved in to reap fortunes from the trade.

II

LODAR was one of them. Cashiered from the Earth Fleet, an ex-officer, he was well trained to outmaneuver the patrols. It was he who offered Ray his first job in months.

"Get in on the gravy," he urged. "They already made you a goat, and no one else will enjoy you!"

After all, it wasn't criminal. They were only doing what the Company had done for years. There was a thrill of adventure in the risky smuggling, a sense of getting even with those who had disgraced him unjustly.

Yes, Ray was curious to see these Mutes who were at the base of his trouble.

He followed Lodar along the central corridor to the mid-section well, and down to the lower deck. The surging hum of the converters wafted on the warm air as they passed the engine room.

In the after hold Jenkins and his Number Two Gang were bracing a large metal cage. Entering behind Lodar, Ray stared with mingled feelings at the captives behind the bars.

"Why, they look like humans!" he gasped. No wonder so many people objected to the trade!

They were slightly smaller than humans, with paler skin, and their hair was blond, almost ashen. They regarded their captors with large blue eyes, but the rustling of grass and skins in which they were dressed was the only sound they made.

"Like our earliest type of man, perhaps," Lodar admitted. "But of a different evolution. No vocal cords."

"Just dummies." Jenkins spoke up from behind Ray.

"That's a lie!" The indignant voice was a woman's.

Gripping the bars, she stared angrily out at them. She had the small figure of a Mute, but her bare arms were bronzed, and her hair was dark, in long curls.

"They can talk." She shook the bars vigorously. "Release us, you sinners!"

Lodar suddenly scowled. "You're no Venus Mute!" He grabbed her hand and twisted it over. The palm was small and pink, not the bluish white of a Mute.

"Turn us loose, you heathen!" she raged, her large brown eyes aflame. "The Great Zipher will pour his wrath on you!"

"A missionary!" Lodar snorted savagely. He whirled on Jenkins. "Who brought her in here?" he bellowed in sudden fury.

Jenkins backed away, blinking his short sighted eyes. "I—I don't know. I never seen her before."

The captain turned back to Ray. "Help me get her out," he growled.

Ray silently guarded the door while Lodar entered the cage and dragged the protesting girl outside. She refused to leave without the others, but Lodar grimly hauled her out and threw her clear of the door.

"I ought to throw you off in space!" He eyed the girl viciously.

Ray locked the door uneasily. Kidnaping a missionary would mean plenty of investigation. Earth zealously protected all its numerous and varied religious workers. This one, he knew, belonged to a very small sect—a cult founded in dim antiquity.

"Wait till my father learns of this!" The girl was rubbing her elbows. "He'll call down the wrath of the Great Zipher on this—this ark of abominations! The grave will open to swallow you. Death and oblivion shall come, and everlasting torment—"

"Shut up!" Lodar pushed the girl away. "Why you people waste your time on Mutes—"

"They're not mute!" she stormed. "Woe to you, you—"

"Shut up!" Lodar bawled.

"Very well." She drew herself up to a

full five feet, one. "I'll show you!" She went to the bars. "Emu! Emu! Tell this heathen what the Great Zipher says."

One of the Mutes shuffled forward, a man with blank face. He drew a breath and recited in singsong tones.

"The Great Zipher say, come unto me all ye who look for work, and I give."

"See!" The girl turned imperiously. "Now, let them loose!"

"A parrot!" Lodar snapped. "Come on above or do I drag you?"

For a moment she looked rebellious, then she shrugged the skin cloak about her slender shoulders and turned with them to the well stairs.

McVane was leaning curiously out the engine room door, his loose jacket flapping in the pulsing of warm air.

"A gurl, eh?" He shook his graying head. "That's a bad business, Lodar." His pale blue eyes blinked owlshly.

"Don't get ideas." Lodar snapped. "It wasn't my doing."

"Nah?" McVane teetered solemnly as he leaned forward. "What's your name, girlie?"

"Ellenor." She stared at the engineer.

McVane blinked. He scratched his whiskery chin. "Well, Ellenor, ye can have my cabin for the while," he offered.

"Come on, up you go!" Her dark eyes were bright with anger, but she climbed to the upper deck without further trouble.

They locked her in McVane's cabin.

"Funny, Mac giving up his room for her," Ray remarked as they headed forward to the control room.

"Because he's a no-good drunk?" Lodar sneered. "While some of us could be little gentlemen?" His face turned somber. "McVane is goofy. Had a wife and two kids. They were on that spaceship, *Jeena*, that was lost a few years back. If I didn't let him drink he wouldn't be worth 'jetting'!"

So that explained the captain's easy going attitude toward the little engineer. At least Lodar had some feelings!

"Why not take this girl back to Venus?"

Ray suggested.

"And run into a patrol? Earth Fleet or Company ship, it makes no difference. If we're caught it means life!"

They were operating outside the law, and no one would listen to their excuses. Ray

felt suddenly cold as he thought that over. Unease dampened his admiration for the captain. Lodar was too smart to be captured, his ruthless ability would see the *Vulcan* through all right. But he was quite capable of murdering the girl, if necessary, as a last resort in getting rid of her!

Scowling, Ray followed the captain. In the control room they found Campora studying the magnafux. He looked nervous as Lodar headed straight for him.

"What about this girl we got aboard?" the captain demanded harshly.

"Girl?" Campora looked innocent.

"You led the raid, didn't you?" Lodar's dark eyes were dangerous. "Maybe you were looking for some more fun?" He stepped close to the mate. "Or are you just blind?"

"There was a whole bunch of captives." Campora backed away. "We was in a hurry, and—"

"You damned liar!" Lodar seized his tunic. "You brainless idiot!" His free hand whipped up to slash across Campora's face.

With an oath Campora jerked free and reached for his belt.

Before he could free his gun Lodar's heavy fist smashed into his jaw. The mate slammed against the wall, then sagged to the floor. "Dirty rat!" Lodar took his gun, then kicked him till he stirred.

"Next time you draw on me," he grated, "you go out the disposal chute!"

"That didn't solve anything." Ray stooped to help Campora up.

PROBABLY Campora had brought the girl aboard, perhaps her presence would hang them, but the captain could have used more proper means of discipline. Instead he had deliberately goaded Campora to action. It was as if Lodar had to give physical vent to his rage like a caged animal slashing at the bars.

Then, as Lodar turned briefly his way, Ray thought he saw an appeal for understanding in the dark eyes that slowly lost their angry glare. A fleeting look of the trapped lion, but it was gone in an instant.

"Mind your own business," the captain said sourly. He turned to Campora and growled, "Go wash your face!"

Ray's lips tightened helplessly. After all, Lodar's word was law. It was the only way

to run a spaceship on its vast journeying through emptiness. It was the only insurance against hysteria from taut nerves, the fear of space rays, and claustrophobia in the little metal world.

With a long breath he turned to the magnafux and swung the detector beams. The magnatoid field would instantly react to anything within five units. There was no time lapse as with radar, a vital point when riding on a Benson Drive.

There was no sign of patrols. Only the dim globe of Venus behind and the smaller points of Mars and Earth ahead. Except for the haze of star dust space was empty of threat.

Lodar was again pacing back and forth. Ray could hear his heavy step on the metal plates.

Tramp—tramp—tramp. Then, to his relief, Lodar halted.

"You're a handsome young buck." At the captain's light tone Ray turned, surprised, but there was no sign of mockery on the other's heavy face. "You go talk to that blasted girl. Calm her down. If she'll keep her mouth shut promise her we'll drop her off on Earth."

Ray felt his anger dissipate under a surge of relief. So Lodar was going to take a chance on the girl's silence. He was willing to protect her from the crew and deliver her right side up. After all, it would have been simple to drop her off in space. The crew would never blab. In fact the crew would have urged it.

Under his hard surface Lodar was all right!

In more cheerful frame of mind Ray quit the control room. As he headed along the main corridor a sudden gale of laughter echoed from the well. There was an unpleasant tone to it that drew him, frowning, to the lower deck.

Several of the crew were in the after hold. They were grouped around the cage of Mutes and one of them held a long rod. The tableau was obvious, Ray strode in angrily.

"That'll be all of that!" he snapped.

Jenkins' glasses glinted as he turned, still grinning. "Captain told us to stand guard, Sir."

His short-sighted squint measured the young navigator.

"Get out!" Ray clenched his fist. "All of you, except Williams, get out!" He waited as they filed past him with sullen looks, then he turned into the engine room.

McVane was sitting at his little desk, drowsing in the warm, oily air. He roused at Ray's tread and absently closed a lower drawer before he turned. Hiding his bottle! The man would drink himself to death!

"The girl is in your cabin," Ray said shortly.

"Good." McVane's eyes were bleary and, for a moment, pity closed in on Ray. After all, he had no right to condemn the little engineer for his weakness—his whole family wiped out.

"What do you know about these Mutes?" he asked more gently.

"They can't talk." McVane drew into himself. "Go ask the girl if you want to know!" His hand trembled toward the lower drawer.

Disgusted, Ray turned away. The whole crew wore an armor plate of callous indifference! It was like no ship Ray had ever flown. Muttering, he climbed back to the main deck, to McVane's cabin.

The girl was sitting on a bunk, combing her hair with angry sweeps. She gave him one hot glance, then ignored him completely.

"Look," he began, "I'm as anxious to get you out of here as you are. I don't want to see you—hurt—"

"The Great Zipher will guard me," she snapped. "He gives peace and security in our times."

"Sure, sure." Ray frowned impatiently. "But the rest of us want peace and security, too. If you make trouble—"

"Why is a young man like you consorting with these sinners?" She looked at him with sudden curiosity. "You don't belong here!"

Ray stared at her. What was her name? Oh, yes, Ellenor.

"If you repent in time—"

He laughed harshly. "Nothing doing. This may be no healthy job, maybe I'll quit after this, but don't get ideas. What I came to—"

"I know what you came to beg," she said scornfully. "I will make no deal with evil. You can't harm me. You will all slay yourselves. The ship is doomed!"

She spoke with such certainty that for a moment Ray wondered if she might know something. Perhaps she was aware of coming rescue. Still, that was ridiculous. She had been caged with the rest. She was bluffing, perhaps to allay her own fears.

He tried another tack. Sympathy. He asked her about herself.

She was a missionary's daughter, born on Venus, and had grown up among the words of the Great Zipher.

"And who is the Great Zipher?" Ray demanded, amused. There were countless little religions flourishing under free thought.

"No one knows. We know he saved the world from the last great plague of Depression. People were affected by a great Gloom and saw no purpose in life. They shrunk inside and suffered mental disease. The Great Zipher said—only believe that ye have plenty, and spend your substance in good things, and these shall come to pass."

"And did they?" he prodded.

"Are there any more plagues of Depression?" she asked tartly.

It sounded like a cheerful religion, but Ray declined to argue. He reverted back to his main purpose.

"Being religious, you shouldn't demand vengeance onus," he pointed out. "Suppose we turn you loose if you promise to keep that little mouth shut?"

"Your own sins will betray you anyway."

"There's nothing wrong in capturing these Mutes," he snapped. "They're not human. We don't mistreat them!"

"How long do they live in captivity?" she demanded bitterly. "A few months, a year or two, and then they die. On strange planets, cut off from all their kind, they die miserably."

He gave it up.

When Lodar heard of this he shook his head and fuffed.

"You're too easy, Burk. Perhaps Campora can do better."

"She'll come to her senses in time," Ray urged. Above all, he didn't want Campora turned loose on the girl. "Give me time."

"Yea." Lodar's smile was grimly mocking. "In time she'll make a complete sucker of you! But it might be diverting. Go ahead!"

III

THE very vastness of space lends a sense of security from detection. The enormous speed required to cover the parsecs between systems gives advantage to those who elude the patrols.

The *Vulcan*, bound for Earth, streaked through the blackness like a swift needle in illimitable space. Its sensitive detector beams probed the spangled cosmos for danger.

Inside, the crews changed shift and slept, lulled by the warm hum of converters. It was a secure little world of glittering lights and steel, no different from the many Company ships which Ray had flown in the past.

He was standing in the warm hold, staring through the bars at the Mutes. Their large eyes turned to his, but there was no other sign of awareness, life. They were delicately built, almost like children. No wonder they made appealing pets, semi-slaves.

Almost angrily Ray shook the bars. "Can't you talk," he growled. There was an uneasy movement, but no answer. "Speak up, you dumbbells!" He grew impatient under the silent stares.

Impatient with himself for trying to make them talk, as if that would solve anything! Yet, they seemed so intelligent. They were clothed, they had some sort of local government. Surely they must be able to communicate. But they only stared!

He had a fleeting impression as if they were sorry for him.

He wondered suddenly if they were telepathic. He concentrated on the idea, but no inkling came. Only blankness. They were just animals. They had to be.

Abruptly he left the hold and climbed to the upper deck. In the corridor Williams stopped him.

"I hear we're still headed for Earth, Sir." The man's dark face held a worried look.

"Yes." Ray waited, but the other only shuffled his feet in uncomfortable silence, so he turned toward the girl's cabin.

Ellenor would know the answer.

"Are those Mutes telepathic?" he demanded almost savagely of her. The whole idea was unwelcome. In fact, his interest in the Mutes was like a foolish obsession!

"No." She stared at him a long while. "They know how people feel," she said at last. "They know how everything feels—animals, plants, and even the soil."

"That's nothing. I know how people feel."

"No, you don't." She let that sink in. "On Venus they know when the soil wishes to grow things; they know when things are due to happen. The moon of places tells them where to settle; where they are welcome. Theirs is a language of—of feelings, you might say."

"Instinct. Well developed."

"More than that." She assumed a kindly air of instruction. "It is learned. I know that you, for instance, are at war with yourself. You admire this Captain Lodar, but he is evil. Yet you are sorry for him."

"Sorry!" The idea of feeling sorry for Lodar was startling. It had never even vaguely occurred to him. Lodar was too self-sufficient.

She shrugged, a dainty movement. "You are mentally blind. You don't believe your inner senses." Her delicate face wore a frown as she groped for words. "Lodar hopes to retire on Earth, to live in peace on his ill-gotten gains. But Lodar knows he will never live to enjoy that peace." Her eyes grew large as they met his. He had the uneasy feeling as if she'd opened his mind like a book. Probably her words had overstimulated his imagination. "And you know that, too, inside of you," she ended.

"I know—"

"That Lodar will die," she completed placidly. "Better take us back to Venus."

Was the girl trying to bewitch him? Bogg him down in a tangle of mystic nonsense? An air of intimacy tingled his senses. He wanted to touch the girl, to comfort her. Abruptly he stood up.

"Better think over about that promise to keep silent." He felt as if something very fragile had shattered. He was vaguely sorry about it, yet determined to stick to reality.

CAMPORA was in the control room when Ray arrived. The First Mate was anxiously focussing the triangulation vernier on the magnaflex screen.

"There's a ship on our tail," he muttered. "See if you can analyze it."

Ray took over and explored the field for tensions around the black dot on the screen.

"Got an eight plate Benson Drive," he concluded at last. "It's a Company ship!"

Campora sounded a general alarm. "I told Lodar to keep off an Earth course!" he gritted.

There was a rush of feet in the corridor as the crew ran for their stations. In minutes the captain himself appeared. Lodar already knew what to expect. He brushed Campora aside after a dozen words.

"Get the gun crews set," he told him shortly.

"How about changing course?" the mate demanded sullenly.

"I know what to do!" Lodar rapped. "Get going!" His eyes narrowed angrily as he watched Campora stamp out and slam the door. Then abruptly he turned to prowl nervously from control panel to magnaflux and back again.

Ray said nothing. He was wondering alertly just how this was going to affect the girl. He hoped she'd forgotten. Under onslaught of Lodar's driving energy human lives were nothing. Even now the captain's dark eyes blazed with excitement, a savage delight in the approaching danger.

The young navigator began to plot the other ship's course. It was curving in behind them on the left. The intent was obvious; to overtake from one side and drive the *Vulcan* into a sheering curve. It would take power to get away, lots of power!

Ray called McVane on the interphone, breathed a sigh of relief as the engineer promptly answered. "We're running into trouble. Get your teakettle going—fast," he ordered.

"Ay, ay," McVane mumbled.

"Keep awake!" Ray hissed savagely. "If we're caught now it'll mean life for us!"

"Take it easy, I'll give ye power. If need be," McVane added morosely, "enough to blow us all to hell!"

The captain was studying the magnaflux when Ray turned.

"They're cutting in." His thick finger traced a curve. The pursuer's tactics were obvious—to drive the *Vulcan* into an ever-tightening spiral aided by his greater speed.

"Why don't they radio?" Ray glanced at the silent receiver.

"At this speed?" Lodar grunted. "No chance! There'll only be a few seconds of contact."

It was true. On any course, the two ships would flash past each other with scant time for talk. If the *Vulcan* was an innocent trader it would haul to, if not it would travel, or surrender. There was no chance of surrender.

Lodar had too much at stake. He was carrying a fortune back to Earth. His last chance at a decent life. As for the crew, most of them were wanted by the police in half the cities of Earth. Their safety lay in the outer planets or in space.

"We'll take a chance." Ray glanced at Lodar for confirmation, then tapped the magnaflux. "They've got more power, more guns, and they'll outrun us. We've got to cut out."

"Go ahead!" Lodar nodded tensely, like a leashed hound scenting trouble. "Campora's got the gun crews ready."

Ray hadn't figured on blasting at the Company ship. He had hoped for a swift getaway. Still, this was no time for fine distinctions. After all, he had joined the *Vulcan* of his own free will. He couldn't change his mind now. But, if he ever got out of this . . .

He turned to the controls, concentrating on his job.

The Benson Plates on the outer hull shifted gratingly, turning to alter the drive. The moan of the ether whorls pitched higher as the *Vulcan* creaked to swing ponderously on a new course. It made a huge figure S curve, designed to pull it out of the threatened spiral.

In seconds the proximity alarms shrilled. As the ship cut closer to its pursuer Ray tightened the turn till the *Vulcan* swung sharply to right. There was a rattle of sound as loose objects spilled over the decks.

The other ship was on the ordinary visiscreen now, a black streak that danced to one side of the *Vulcan*. Under his feet, Ray could feel the jarring thrust of McVane's converters, he could sense the leap of the *Vulcan* as he closed in the last dregs of power.

But still the other ship crept closer.

Ray shook his head silently at Lodar who stood at the interphone. The captain glanced

hastily at the visiscreen, turned back to his mouthpiece.

"Got the range, Campora?" He leaned forward, hawklike. "Now!" he bellowed.

The *Vulcan* shook as the broadside was fired and the thrusting drive faltered while power surged to the weapons.

It was a miss. Lodar swore.

"Fire at will," he yelled, slamming down the phone. He hurried to the visiscreen.

THE other ship had shifted course to follow them, though it was still abeam, still trying to drive them into a spiral. Ray swung the *Vulcan* again, cutting dangerously close. The dot on the visiscreen swelled and centered on the beam again.

Campora's crew were firing intermittently. A shot exploded on the Company ship's hull, a spray of melted steel that flashed and was gone.

"We disabled them!" Lodar exulted.

The other ship was losing way, still holding its course, but slowing. Then they flashed by it. Ray felt relief. The other wasn't badly hurt. He'd get back to port.

And, in that moment, the Company ship blasted with all its guns. The *Vulcan* rocked under the blow of solid energy. A vast eruption tore out a section of rear plating. The Benson Drive quit.

Then they were out of range.

Lodar was on the interphone. "Get on that damage!" he roared. "Campora, keep those guns ready. McVane! Hello, McVane!" He slammed down the instrument. "Some day I'll kill that McVane with my own hands!"

"Maybe he's hurt," Ray snapped.

Lodar grunted and picked up the phone again. "Hello, Williams, get a first aid crew out and look for casualties."

He turned to pace the floor, aroused, thirsting now for action. Up and down, up and down, as if the pent up energy flamed within him.

For the present the engagement was over. Both ships were damaged. They would drift thousands of miles apart before either could resume flight. At least the *Vulcan* was fairly safe. And space was a vast hiding place.

"They'll never take us now," Ray said, trying to divert Lodar's ceaseless activity. The man positively burned with energy.

"Not alive, anyway!" The captain turned. "Not for their brand of justice! You know why I was cashiered from the Earth Fleet? I was an upstart. I didn't belong to the right clique. So when someone stole the club funds they refused to hold a trial. Sure, they just asked me quietly to resign so as to avoid a scandal." He ground his teeth. "I was no thief!"

"That's when my wife left me," he added flatly. "Can you expect justice from scum like that?" He glared. "Take all you can, my boy, and die like a man when the time comes!"

It was the same old story Ray had heard a dozen times, and he was sick of it. Also he was sick of Lodar's ceaseless pacing. The fight had left the man wound up like a spring!

"I'll go look things over," Ray turned to the exit without waiting for the other's approval.

The corridor was strangely silent now that the vast throb of the converters no longer boomed along it. There was a dim clatter of men working in the after section of the ship, but Ray turned to the mid-section well and slid down to the engine room.

The auxiliary generator was whining briskly, but the main converters were in bad shape. Blue, acrid smoke poured from the inspection plates, hazed in the glaring lamplight, and there was a stinging odor of extinguisher gases.

McVane was lying on the metal floor.

Ray dragged him to the well and put him on the elevator. The engineer wasn't badly hurt, only a nasty cut on the head. In the upper passage he halted Williams and several of the crew.

"Where's your first aid kit?" he demanded.

"Sorry, Sir." Williams grinned. "Captain ordered us on another job. The kit's aft."

Swearing, Ray hurried to the after section and retrieved the medical supplies. Back in the corridor, he decided to let the girl look after McVane. She might as well be of some use.

He dragged McVane to the cabin and unlocked the door.

The girl inside almost bowled him over in a frantic attempt to escape.

"Here, quiet down!" He held the strug-

gling figure, enjoying a brief moment of her nearness. "The scrap is over. You're perfectly safe."

"I don't care about that!" the girl flamed. "What are you doing to my friends?"

"Nothing." He turned her loose reluctantly. "Here, take care of McVane." Watching her cautiously, he dragged the engineer inside.

"Let me out!" She tried to squeeze past him. "They're doing awful things!"

"Calm down." He frowned uneasily. "You look after McVane. I'll take a look at your friends."

Despite her protests he locked her in again, then impatiently hurried to the well to slide down and turn into the hold.

Six of the crew were clustered by the cage which held the Mutes.

"What—" Then he saw what had happened. The sight made him sick.

The Mutes lay in grotesque heaps. Dead. They had been rayed!

"Who ordered this?" he demanded thickly. His mouth felt dry. His stomach was tying itself into knots.

Williams' swarthy face turned his way. "Campora said it was the captain's orders." The man spat deliberately. "A damned good idea, too, unloading them!"

IV

ABRUPTLY Ray turned and ran for the upper deck. He burst into the control room.

Lodar turned from the chart file. The captain's face was white. His eyes burned starkly.

"So—you know they're dead." His voice was expressionless. "Are they any worse off dead than in a zoo?"

"You ordered those Mutes killed!"

Lodar made a hopeless gesture. "If we're intercepted, and have to fight, we'll all be killed, including the Mutes. So we get rid of them. We're clean, we go to Earth!"

"Cold-blooded murder!" Ray gritted. "A cowardly—"

"Stop it!" Lodar's voice cracked. "They're not human. Getting hysterical won't bring them back. Forget it. We're not playing ring-around-the-rosy!"

"You'll pay for this!" Rage at his own

helplessness almost gagged Ray. "When we land on Earth I'm going to have you hunted down like a dog!"

"It takes evidence to hang a man." The captain chuckled mirthlessly. "Do you think I'd willingly jettison a valuable cargo? We'll be drifting for a week, at the mercy of any patrol ship that comes along. I had to do it."

A sudden thought iced Ray's boiling emotions.

Ellenor! He'd have to watch out for the girl.

With the Mutes gone, Lodar would have to reckon with the girl.

Ray turned to the door. He had to get away from Lodar before he was tempted to shoot the man!

"You and I are through, Lodar." He tried to keep his voice steady, to bottle up his fury. He'd need all his wits to get out of this mess! His former grudge against the Company, against Earth justice, was childish and futile. He had been a brainless fool to fall for the romance, the swashbuckling air of the *Vulcan*. "I'll work with you till we land," he said through clenched teeth. "After that we're through!"

He slammed the door behind him. He wanted to get as far away from Lodar as possible, to the rear of the ship, where a repair crew was blasphemously patching the hull.

Several space-suited figures were outside, welding the plates, while others, inside, used plastic matting to save the air. Jenkins was in command.

"Where are we now, Mr. Burk?" he asked Ray.

"About halfway to Earth." Ray tried to sound normal.

"Is the captain still insisting on going ahead?"

Ray nodded, dislike of the other welling in him.

"Looky." Jenkins drew him to one side. "The men don't like the idea, see, of going to Earth. Most of us skipped out to space for a good reason, see?"

Ray nodded again, and his lips tightened impatiently. Jenkins was a bully.

"Well, sir, maybe you could persuade the captain to change his mind, huh? We don't want trouble."

"All right, I'll see." Ray started to turn away.

"Campora tried to tell the captain." Jenkins' grimy paw rested on Ray's arm, while he peered at him through his glasses. "But Lodar don't like Campora, see?"

Ray had paused despite his loathing for the man.

"Sure." Jenkins moved closer. "Campora knifed a guy just before he skipped Earth. It was his second offense. Don't let on I told you." He looked anxious. "I was just trying to help, see?"

"Yes." Ray turned away disgustedly. "I'll talk to Lodar."

He was beginning to hate every man aboard the *Vulcan*. That wasn't good. It was a sign of space hysteria. He'd have to guard against such things.

Vigilance was the only safety factor.

Stay out in space too long and you begin to brood. Worse still if you are psychologically able to stick it out long enough, you become infected with the deadly space rays that burn you up with febrile energy. Or you go batty with claustrophobia.

And they had all been out too long. They were reckless and unstable. He must get Ellenor away safely if it was the last thing he ever did.

Before the day period was over he went to see the girl, dreading to face her with the news of the Mutes' slaying. But she already knew.

"You needn't tell me." Her brown eyes were dazed with pain. "I know. They are dead."

What was there to say? That he would have saved them if he could? That he was sorry? Furious at Lodar? They were only fine words. He turned silently to the bunk where McVane lay asleep, his gray head swathed in bandages.

"He's all right," Ellenor said. "He lost a lot of blood, but I got the cook to bring some food. He ate it."

Ray turned back to her. He took her arm and led her to a chair, aware once more of that tingle of pleasure at the touch of her.

"I'll do what I can to help you," he said earnestly. "But you've got to promise Lodar that you'll keep quiet. If you don't I'm afraid he'll—"

"I'm not afraid!" Her red lips curled.

She had parted the long, dark hair in two braids, which she was now tugging as if for emphasis. "If you are my friend—"

"I am," he interrupted swiftly. "God knows I'm sorry enough to be tangled up in this outfit! But it'll take more than just—"

The door opened and Lodar walked in. He glanced suspiciously at the girl, then took a look at McVane. Evidently satisfied, he straightened up.

"I saw the latch open and wondered if the girl was still safe." His dark glance rested impassively on her. "Have you decided to be sensible?"

"Sure she has," Ray said quickly.

"You can't frighten me!" The girl's dark eyes were unquailing before Lodar's. Her voice rose. "It's you who is afraid, you murderer! No matter how you strive—"

"Shut up!" Lodar said.

"You'll never see Earth!" she ended recklessly.

Lodar spun on his heels and stalked out.

"You idiot!" Ray hissed, then hurried after Lodar. She would drive the man to drastic action in spite of all effort to save her silly little neck! As he locked the door, Lodar eyed him curiously.

"Quite the spitfire, isn't she?" he remarked mildly.

Ray wondered if he meant just that or if he was covering up a consuming rage. He was still wondering about it as he uneasily went to his own cabin. Of one thing he was sure, that Lodar would save his own skin at any cost!

That thought kept him tossing on his bunk long after he'd snapped off the light. He could hear the captain's restless movements in his cabin next door. He could hear the sounds of the Number Three repair crew, his ears were straining for the hum of the converters.

There were many noises on the *Vulcan*, softer and more furtive. The stir of men off duty, the murmur of voices. Uneasy speculations.

Opposition to Lodar's course seemed a material thing, a tangible force distilled of fear. Like a cross current that moved deeply. Ray scowled at the dark ceiling of his cabin. Of course, it was only imagination. The unusual silences. The cessation of driving power on the *Vulcan*. These were playing

tricks with his ears. The *Vulcan* was drifting, slowly curving off course toward the sun.

McVANE was supervising repairs on his machines. He had moaned about feeling sick, but Lodar had refused to listen to his pleas. For one thing, they had drifted two days now and the *Vulcan* had inevitably expended its momentum against the solar pull. It had begun the long fall sunward. And, beside the threat of being broiled, there was the deadly danger of space rays. They would burn up a man just as surely, even though in a different way. So haste was imperative.

It might take a week to repair the main converters. The insulation was badly charred on the stator coils. Several were burned out completely. So McVane was put to work.

The rattle of chain hoists and hiss of arc welder echoed hollowly through the drifting ship. Even so, had it not been for the comforting hum of the auxiliary generator the silence would have been maddening.

Ray had avoided seeing the girl since the death of the Mutes. Probably she blamed him as much as the others for their murder, lumping him in a general category of black infamy. And how could he prove to her that he wasn't like Lodar, Campora, and the rest? Unless she could really sense thoughts, as she hinted. It seemed preposterous, yet she might have learned some such thing from the Mutes.

She might even know what Lodar was thinking! Ray grinned at that. Even now the captain was probably fuming like an angry bull.

He was eating a huge meal when Ray entered his cabin to give him a report. He continued to ladle vast quantities of hash while the young navigator outlined the progress of repairs. Finally he threw down his spoon and wiped his mouth.

"Those men are deliberately stalling on the job!" he snarled.

Ray didn't deny it. They'd both known it all along.

"If you'd change your mind about heading for Earth—" Ray stopped. The dishes jumped as Lodar banged the table.

"Give in to a bunch of lousy space scum?" Lodar glared. "I know what they're afraid

of. Every one of them is a jailbird! But, by Jupiter, I'm running this ship!"

"No one is running the ship right now," Ray said coldly. "The *Vulcan* is falling faster every minute. Our distance from the sun—"

"I'll talk to the swabs!" Lodar's jaw bulged as he pushed away his chair. "I'll beat out their brains if I have to!" He jerked open the door, then stared out. "What do you want?"

Campora was standing in the corridor. At Lodar's expression he fell back a pace, then held his ground.

"The men asked me to represent them—"

"Now, by hell!" Lodar roared. "I've had enough! Are you a First Mate or a sniveling messenger boy for the crew? Get out of my way!"

"I want to warn you—"

"Stand aside." Lodar shoved the mate back.

"Better listen to him." Ray's voice was harsh. Lodar deserved all he got, but there was no sense in stirring the *Vulcan* to a charnal house of mob violence. He knew only too well the temper of the crew after two days of wracking tension.

"Listen to a coward like this?" Lodar sneered savagely and pointed at Campora. "He's afraid for his own hide! But he wasn't scared to stick a knife in a man's back on Earth! Oh, no! But now he's petrified at the thought of a policeman. He's stirring up the crew. He's a traitor to his rating!"

"You can't handle men when your own temper blows up!" Ray snapped. Lodar should know that. He was an ex-fleet man.

Lodar jerked round, visibly struggling for control. "I guess you're right," he admitted slowly, his first fury spent. He turned to the mate, whose sallow face and slitted eyes were full of venom. "So you're afraid of Earth and the police, the whole kit and kaboodle of you. Well, we won't land there."

Campora looked his utter disbelief.

"We'll swing a thousand miles off Earth and I'll land in the escape boat. You can go on to Mars, sell the *Vulcan* to pay off the crew and yourself." Lodar smiled grimly. "Now get out of my way!"

As the captain strode down the corridor,

Campora turned bitterly to the young navigator.

"He's lying, he's going to land on Earth. The filthy double-crosser wants to pay us off with a stolen ship, too!" Campora grabbed Ray's arms. "That escape boat is loaded with his takings. Thinks we're a bunch of suckers to let him be the big shot on dear old Earth! We'll see about that!"

"You're a fine officer!" Ray stared at the mate.

V

IT WAS a mystery to him how Campora had ever won his position. Once upon a time he must have had a lot of ambition, because it took a lot of drive for a self-educated man like Campora to become an officer. Perhaps the struggle had soured him.

Ray knew how tough it was. He'd had to fight his way, but— He stopped in mid-thought. Actually, he was no better. They were all in the same boat!

When Ray went aft a little later he found the repair crew working furiously. Lodar paced back and forth between the two main converters, his fists clenched and eyes alert. One of the crew lay sprawled in a corner. A glance was enough. The man was dead.

Ray shrugged mentally. Lodar was within his rights, as captain, to enforce his orders even to this extent.

Nor did Lodar relax his driving vigilance one whit as the hours dragged by. He raged from crew to crew, hammering down all sign of opposition, aflame with a single purpose—to repair the ship and take it to Earth. Anger, pride, or stubbornness—it made no difference which drove him—his mind was made up.

There was no turning him now.

"I'll run the *Vulcan* where I wish if I have to kill every man of you!" he raged.

Ray searched the crew's quarters and removed all likely weapons. He got a spare key for McVane's cabin and took it to the girl.

"Better lock yourself in," he told her. "There may be trouble!"

"I know." Her dark eyes were serious. "If you would only persuade the captain—"

"Nothing doing!" Again he felt an im-

pulse to touch her, to hold her. He wondered if it sprang from his own mind or hers—or was he just nuts? But her smile, at least, sent a flood of warm relief coursing through him as he left.

He turned to his own cabin.

As navigator, there was nothing at present for him to do. It might be best for him to get some rest while he could. He was afraid to sleep, but long training had taught him how to cat-nap. He relaxed, keeping an ear trained for trouble.

The repair work must go on or the *Vulcan* was lost, for the sun was perilously close. Ray had been afraid to tell the crew just how close, because the single escape ship would hold only a fraction of them.

He must have fallen asleep, because he was suddenly aware that the sound of work had ceased. Instead he could hear the quivering notes of McVane's voice, singing lugubriously. Plainly he was sad.

*"I'd give a thousand years in hell in pain
To see my Nelly once again!"*

And drunk!

Ray jerked on his tunic and hurried out.

In the corridor he paused at Lodar's cabin and tried the door. It was locked. So, Lodar had gone to bed, contemptuously certain that he'd licked the crew into shape. Which meant that Campora should be in charge.

But there was an air of unease, of impending disaster, in the driveless ship. Perhaps it was a result of McVane's doleful song, but Ray found himself suddenly tense.

The ship was too quiet. No sound came from below as he went to the well. Even McVane had quit his lament. Momentarily Ray was tempted to see if Ellenor was all right. He decided against it, hurried along the corridor to the crew's quarters, aft.

As soon as he stepped inside the mess room, suspicion froze him. At his step the huddle of men had suddenly broken. The faces which turned his way all wore the same tense look.

It was time for the payoff!

THERE would be no more talk. Their faces told him that.

Jenkins peered at Ray through his glasses.

Without preamble, he demanded, "Are you in with us or Lodar?"

It was a ridiculous question. All of Ray's training had conditioned him to meet such emergency in only one way. Right or wrong, there was only one answer.

He leaped back through the door and slammed it, then swung the emergency latch and spun the sealing wheel. It would hold them for a while—till they burned it down.

He dashed for the central well, slid down the pole in a mad spiral, and jumped for the engine room. McVane was alone at his desk, a shrunken figure in the glaring lights, his head slumped down on his chest.

Ray kicked the chair from under him and hauled him erect. "Get to the control room!" he panted.

McVane's lean hand closed on his bottle, then his feet were dragging as Ray hauled him to the well. His head wobbled as he took up the song again.

*"She's gone and never will I see
My sweetheart, dear to me."*

"You fool!" Ray shook him violently. "There's mutiny! Up, quick!" He propelled the smaller man up the stairs. In the main corridor he stopped at the girl's cabin.

"Here." He shook McVane again, then handed him the keys. "Get that girl to the control room."

While McVane fumbled at the lock Ray hammered on Lodar's cabin. It was an age before the captain appeared. His dark eyes took in McVane and the girl, then swept back to Ray.

"Trouble, eh?" Without waiting to hear more he reached for his gun and joined them.

It was vital to hold the front of the ship. In any other section they would be merely prisoners. Lodar ran swiftly past McVane and the girl, while Ray brought up the rear, alert for attack.

So Lodar was first to enter the control room.

Ray didn't see what happened, but a moment later came the zing of ray guns, a scream. Campora stumbled from the room. He ran past Ray, still screaming, headed aft, waving an arm which was blasted to a stump.

Ray went on, gritting his teeth.

"Didn't expect us so soon," Lodar said grimly as they gathered in the control room. "He figured on holding this place, but he got too excited!" He pointed to the splatter of burned metal where Campora's shot had missed him.

He turned to McVane who was looking sick. "Here, take this gun and stand by." Then, as he shoved the weapon in the other's shaking hand, "We'll jump 'em before they organize." He faced Ray. "Coming?"

Ray nodded grimly. He was playing a travesty of an officer's duty, but it was the only way.

The two went down the passage, peering into cabins as they headed for the well. Here Lodar slammed down the fire hatch, thus blocking off the lower deck. He had just snapped the last wedge when Ray heard the clang of metal aft, and the patter of feet. The crew had burned out of their prison.

"Let's hold them here," Ray said. "I took their guns yesterday."

"Good!" Lodar stood beside him, legs outspread.

But as the first man, Williams, appeared and sighted Lodar, there was the vicious zing of a ray gun. The wall beside Lodar erupted sizzling metal as he ducked.

"So you took their guns!" he snarled, firing at the same time as Ray.

With yells, their attackers retreated, blasting wildly. The corridor filled with acid smoke and red-hot metal. Half the lights were gone, the rest were hazed by the stinking fumes. The mutineers were firing blindly from behind a corner, depending upon mere volume rather than any sort of aiming.

"Back up!" Lodar gasped. "Campora gave them all those weapons."

They retreated to the control room and bolted the door, while McVane and the girl stared.

"We're in a spot," Lodar admitted.

"And we can thank you for it," Ray snapped. "This crew will have no more compunction over killing us than they had over bumping off those Mutes!"

"Well, now." McVane shifted his feet restlessly. "Let's not squabble. Anyway, 'twas Campora persuaded the captain to get

rid of the Mutes."

They all tensed at a sudden sound outside—metal dragging the floor and voices. Then suddenly the smell of burning paint.

The door panel turned red, the paint peeled off, and dropped to the deck. Within seconds a hole blazed through.

Lodar aimed his gun at the opening and fired. He grinned as a yelp sounded, then moved beside the door to trigger several bursts along the corridor beyond. There were horrible yells, the scurry of retreat, then silence. Lodar stooped to peer.

"Got four of 'em," he announced. "That'll cool 'em off!"

He crossed swiftly to the chart case, heaved it aside, and slid open a small hidden panel. He reached inside to close a switch. "This'll help too," he added grimly. "Gas!"

"What a monster!" the girl said.

L ODAR ignored her. He was looking at McVane. The engineer had taken a bottle from his pocket, was stretching his scraggy neck to gurgle it.

"Can't you stay sober?" With a stride Lodar swept the bottle away and smashed it on the deck.

"What for?" McVane slumped against the wall.

Lodar raised his hands angrily, but Ellenor moved swiftly and swung him away from the groggy engineer.

"Let him alone!" she raged. "He doesn't care any more. You can't beat that out of him!"

Lodar's eyes glittered. "You know too much about everything," he said tightly.

Her chin tilted defiantly. "I know that you'll never see Earth again!"

"Damn you!" He lashed out suddenly. His slap sent her sprawling against the wall.

With a snarl Ray hurled himself at Lodar. His fist slammed a shoulder as Lodar spun to meet the infuriated charge. A second blow, that crunched Ray's knuckles on the other's head, never even jarred the larger man.

Growling, he reached out. His huge hands closed on Ray's neck, the thumbs dug into his windpipe.

"You dumb fool!" Lodar's clenched teeth lay bare between tight drawn lips. Convul-

sively his strangling grip tightened.

Ray's fist slammed the grinning lips, with savage joy he felt the smash of teeth. He hammered at Lodar's face, beating it in frenzied rage while his lungs strained for air. His back jolted the wall and Lodar was slamming his head on the plates.

His lungs were jerking, the room blurred with pulsing darkness. He saw only Lodar's blazing eyes, felt the power of his viselike grip. The man was made of steel, driven by raw violence.

And, in that flashing moment, Ray guessed Lodar's secret, the why of his driving energy, cagelike paces, and burning eyes!

Space Rays! Ray heaved convulsively, trying to break the strangling grip.

Lodar had been too long in space. The days were killing him, burning him up inside. He would go on with roaring metabolism, like an overdriven jet, till his heart burst!

And that would be soon now. Lodar's compelling urge to return to Earth was the instinct of a dying animal for its lair, to die with its kind. Nothing would stop him. Nothing except death!

The pounding in Ray's head flashed streams of light through the blackness. Only faintly could he feel his own hands beating for air.

Then suddenly his tortured lungs heaved, sucking in life. The grinding clutch dropped from his throat. For a moment he could only gulp, rub his agonized neck. Then slowly sight returned.

McVane stood holding a gun. There was a foolish, startled look on his lined face as he stared at Lodar. The captain, gritting his teeth and leaning on the control board, held a hand to his shoulder. It was a mass of blood and rags.

"You—you fool!" Lodar swayed, starting at the engineer. "You bleary-eyed little Sir Galahad!"

The girl was pressing a cup of water to Ray's lips. He drank, still gagging, staring at her bruised face. He was conscious of her arm around him, of the pleasure her nearness lent. He shook his throbbing head.

McVane was speaking petulantly. "Let's—let's have no more arguments." The little man's eyes were pleading. "I had to do it,

Lodar. And you're the only real friend I had!"

"Some friend!" Lodar ground his teeth in pain, then grimaced as blood dripped from the smashed gums. "Here, help me patch up this shoulder."

Obediently McVane hunted up bandages. Lodar's eyes were somber as the engineer and Ellenor tied up his burned shoulder and put the useless arm in a sling.

"I lost my temper," he muttered at last. "Forget it."

He probably meant it for a declaration of peace. Ray's own fury had cooled now he knew what lay behind the other's violence.

After all, the girl's words must have stung Lodar to a hopeless frenzy. She had blasted at his innermost longing to see Earth for the last time. Deep in his own heart he'd known all along that he would die like a dog in space. Her words had only drawn the searing truth from his own subconscious hell.

They all jumped as the interphone shrilled.

Ray switched on the speaker. There was a medley of sound, smashing glass, shouts, and laughter.

"They've got into McVane's liquor." Lodar crossed the room painfully till he stood beside Ray.

"Ay—and the gas didn't stop them," the engineer added. "They plugged the lines."

Suddenly Jenkins' voice cut shrilly above the background din on the speaker. "Can you hear me, Lodar?"

"I hear you." Lodar's eyes were slitted with pain.

"Okay." There was a fumbling sound. "We're going on to Mars. Take it or leave it. You set the course and we'll get your damned engines going."

"You can rot!"

"Better think it over, Captain. If you monkey around too long, the boys will get impatient. We'll wreck the engines!"

"You wreck those engines and none of you will see Mars or any other place," Lodar said heavily. "There's only one escape boat and the only way to it is through this control room. I'll leave you stranded!"

Jenkins' laughter rattled the speaker. "We'll shoot you down with the broadsides

if you try!" There was a rustling, then, "Hang on, Lodar, a friend of yours wants to talk!"

VI

THERE was a hiss of breath, then Campora's voice cut in. The low tones were shaken by fury. "I'll be waiting, Lodar. No matter where we land, I'll kill you!" His voice rose higher. "So help me, Lodar, if I have to burn while I do it, I'll kill you!"

His voice had cracked hysterically while a shout of approval from the others welled over the receiver.

Lodar snapped off the speaker. "I should have burned off both his arms!" he rumbled. He went to the medical kit and took another pain killer.

If there had been any chance of talking Lodar into a compromise Ray would have tried, but he knew it was useless. Lodar was hag-ridden by that compulsion to head for Earth. Like a dying elephant he was blind to all else. If necessary, the death of the *Vulcan* would be his swan song.

As for the crew, liquor had flamed their hatred of the captain beyond all reason. Campora would certainly never back down now. Nor would it do any good to tell them of their peril from the sun. They'd think he was lying!

Had there been time, there was air and food enough for a siege, but the sun was too close now. A lengthy deadlock would be fatal.

The only other solution was to flee on the escape ship. Leave the crew to their doom. Ray tried not to think what that would be like—the slow roasting to death for the crew. But, even as the thought kept recurring, he knew escape that way was hopeless. As soon as the escape boat took off the crew would blast it with the broadside guns. Anything within miles of their blast would be shriveled!

Nor did Ray like the way in which McVane and Lodar were now whispering on the other side of the room.

Lodar had unearthed a bottle of Terran Whiskey in the emergency kit and had given it to McVane. They'd had a drink together. A peace offering. Now the engineer was adjusting Lodar's bandages, whisper-

ing in urgent tones.

The captain's eyes, pin-pointed with pain, rested somberly on Ray, then shifted as the young navigator returned the stare. Lodar muttered something, his expression setting purposefully. As he stood up, twisting his lips, Ray moved closer to the girl.

He knew Lodar well enough to expect anything. And McVane, after all, was Lodar's man. They'd traveled together too long to split in a pinch.

As the two now crossed the room toward him Ray's hand closed on his gun. At the suspicious move, Lodar's eyes gleamed sardonically.

"Mac and I were talking it over," he said. "Even if we lick the crew there's no time left to repair the *Vulcan*. She's going to take the sun-dive."

Ray nodded silently. Ellenor's hand was resting on his gun arm and it bothered him. He tried to shake her off, but she seemed intent on holding onto him. At any other time he would have been thrilled, but not now.

Lodar went on carefully. The escape boat would hold all four of them but it couldn't make a getaway. Their only alternative was a diversion.

"Two of us stay on the *Vulcan* and engage the crew," Lodar concluded. "The other two get away."

The proposal was an obvious solution, but, coming from Lodar, it could hide black treachery. The captain's overwhelming desire to see Earth again had already precipitated disaster. The man was blind to all but the one great yearning.

"Ellenor wouldn't be any good in a scrap," Ray countered slowly, trying to find a hitch in the plan. "She takes off with one of us."

Lodar argued bitterly. The girl had given enough trouble, she rated no better break than the rest. The lucky ones should be chosen by chance, and chance alone.

Ray flatly refused to budge.

When Ellenor tried to enter the argument it deteriorated into a wrangle between the captain and herself. By this time McVane had almost reached the singing stage again, plainly endeavoring to drown his fright now that the chips were down. Finally the girl took his bottle from him.

"All right!" Lodar growled at last. "I'm in no shape to argue forever. One of us goes with the girl. We'll choose by lot."

HE TURNED to rummage in the emergency kit again. "Ah!" He found a tin of wooden matches and clumsily broke it open. "We'll use three of these. I'll break two, leave one whole. The man who picks the whole one goes with the girl. Right?"

Ray frowned. He trusted neither Lodar nor McVane, but there was no other way to decide the issue unless they resorted to a free-for-all.

"All right," he agreed slowly. "Let Ellenor hold the matches."

Lodar sneered.

"Now wouldn't that be nice for you!" he snarled. "I'll hold them. I'm still giving orders. Or do you want to argue about that, too?" His hand rested on his gun belt.

Ray hesitated. It wasn't so much that he was afraid to die. Only he didn't want to be suckered into it. On the other hand, Lodar had an equal right to be suspicious. "All right," he agreed slowly.

"Don't do it!" Ellenor protested sharply. "There must be another way." But no one paid any attention.

Lodar turned his back and they heard him break two of the matches. When he faced them again there were three little sticks in his large fist. Only the tops showed.

He extended his arm to McVane. "You first. It was your idea!"

McVane blinked, biting his lip, then slowly chose one of the little bits of wood. His hand closed over it, felt it blindly, then he sat down licking his lips. As an afterthought he reached for the bottle.

Lodar grunted, a satisfied grin distorted his split lips.

"You next." His black eyes burned on Ray.

The younger man took one of the two remaining matches. He exhaled sharply as he drew out a whole one.

Lodar rasped an oath, threw the remaining match across the room. "You win!" he ground out.

Ray relaxed slowly. A faint surprise tinged his relief. He had misjudged Lodar, expecting him at the last moment to renege.

Instead, the big man had merely turned to McVane.

"So you and I are the hostages, eh, Mac?" A grim smile lit his face, while his hand rested briefly on the other's narrow shoulder. "Come on, let's get going."

The three men prepared the escape boat. As they loaded the little ship with extra provisions, Ray was alert for treachery, but the captain seemed to have taken his fate philosophically. He even tried to cheer up McVane, though his heavy witticisms only made the little man look sadder.

"Get that girl in," he growled at last.

Ellenor paused briefly as she entered the escape port. Her eyes sought Lodar's. "I'm sorry about the things I said," she offered gently. "I—"

"Go on, get in!" Lodar shoved her, then turned to Ray. "You too. Get set for take-off. When McVane and I tackle the crew I'll toss a signal bomb into the corridor. You'll hear it explode. Take off, fast!"

Ray nodded. He shook hands with McVane, hesitated briefly, then offered his hand to Lodar.

"Go on!" Lodar snarled. "Get out before I get some sense and change my mind!"

Before Ray closed the inner lock, McVane passed him an envelope. "Give it to the girlie," he muttered.

Inside the escape ship, Ray closed the little hatch, then touched the emergency button which swung open the outer port on the *Vulcan's* hull. With the butt of his gun he hammered a signal. They were ready.

Neither he nor Ellenor spoke as they waited. The seconds dragged in silence except for the sound of their breathing.

Suddenly a hollow boom resounded, followed by the sharp rattle of metal.

"That's it!" Ray gunned the little escape ship clear.

They were out in space. The black shape of the *Vulcan* swung behind them, dwindling. It looked inert and ghostly. It looked a dead ship, with no sign of the conflict that was raging inside.

Ray turned the escape boat sharply left, away from the sun, and set the drive for Earth. Behind them the *Vulcan* was fading into blackness off to one side of Sol. Now and then a pale gleam touched the dark sides as it swung sluggishly.

IT WAS all the escape ship could do to gain steady acceleration against the mighty pull behind them. For a while Ray nursed the tiny converter along, till he was sure the drive was winning. Then he joined Ellenor in the cramped little mid-section.

Her brown hair was combed back, starkly outlining the pale face. Her brown eyes were large, underneath one of them was the ugly bruise from Lodar's hand.

"We're loaded down with loot," Ray growled disgustedly. "Let's hope there's grub enough to see us to Earth."

He stared sharply as she remained huddled silently. She was holding the envelope which McVane had given. As he sat down beside her she passed him a sheet of paper. He recognized McVane's untidy scrawl.

"Lodar always wanted to end in a blaze of glory," he read, "so this idea was O.K. with him, too." Ray stared, puzzled.

The girl raised her hand, showing him the two matches that had been wrapped in the note. They were both unbroken!

"Why," Ray gasped, "that means—"

"Lodar cheated," she said softly.

Ray stared back at the *Vulcan*. His hand was on the controls, poised to turn back the little ship. It was unthinkable to leave Lodar now!

"It won't do any good," Ellenor said. "Lodar's life was spent anyway. But McVane—" Suddenly she was crying.

Ray's arm was around her. "He was a hesitant little hero, wasn't he?" He smiled gently down on the girl. They knew that McVane had never loved life, was only drinking himself to the grave, but a deep sense of pity smote him.

Perhaps the fight inside the *Vulcan* would be over swiftly as Lodar had his moment of glorious battle. Perhaps McVane would die quite happily beside his friend.

It wouldn't be entirely in vain.

Ray felt a new purpose in his own life. Lodar's wealth would fight for the right of the Mutes to life, and Ray would join Ellenor, see that she was protected, helped in the battle to come with the powers that sought to enslave her Venus.

It seemed his fate was always to be inextricably tangled with that of the Mutes.

Recommendations by the Board of Space

Navigators, entered this 3rd day of November, 2268.

1. That Navigator Ray Burk be severely reprimanded for:
 - a. Failure to prevent a mutiny.
 - b. Failure to prevent the Vulcan's attack on the Company Ship Elixir, which was damaged.
2. That the wealth of Captain Lodar be turned over to Ray Burk according to the laws of salvage, but minus
 - a. 25% Federal Tax.
 - b. A fine of 10 credits assessed for each Mute killed.
3. That Ray Burk be reinstated to rank of Navigator, Unlimited.
4. That he be assigned the task of investi-

gating conditions on the planet, Venus.

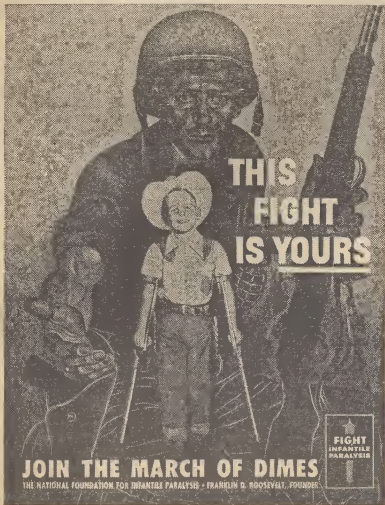
5. That the young woman known as Ellenor be transported freely to her home on Venus.

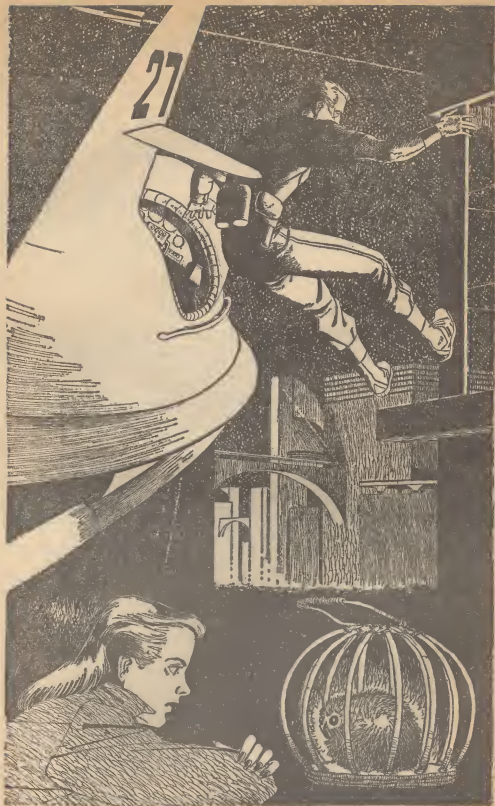
Entered into record by Carter A. Pringle. Reprimands (a) and (b) delivered. Witness, Carter A. Pringle.

Probate court to deliver funds of Lodar (deceased).

per Carter A. Pringle. Addendum: Section five, (5) above, cancelled as not necessary; Ellenor having contracted for matrimony with Ray Burk, Navigator Unlimited, and being no longer a public charge.

Annotated by Carter A. Pringle







Oh Mesmerist from Mimas!

By ROGER DEE

This gloriously gay smiley character; this astounding peace-pervading creature from Saturn's inner moon, was radiating like a space beacon in a meteor shower when it landed on Mars . . . it was madness . . . gargantuan madness

THE Cargo Declarations mart at Areopolis spaceport was humming busily when I walked in. A moment later it was as quiet as a church and twice as attentive.

The sudden hush that fell wasn't out of deference to me, though I'm pretty well known through the odd corners of the Solar System, but because of the Mimasan smiley I carried in a ten-inch tungsten wire cage under my arm. Nothing this side of

Saturn's inner moon can lay down the euphoric aura of peace and brotherhood that a smiley can, and this one was doing a noble job of it. He was one of the first two ever to hit Mars, young and healthy and still unmated, and he was radiating like a space beacon in a meteor shower.

"Hey, it's Blaster Bill Bailey," I heard a trader—an Earthside homo by the sound of him—say. "What's the beautiful little item you brought back this time, Bill?"

They crowded around me, Earthies and Eetees—Extraterrestrials—alike, all trying to get closer to that lovely peace-be-on-you euphoria. I looked them over carefully, counting the house and estimating their probable bids, and for the hundredth time it struck me that the place was more like a zoo than a mart for serious business.

Cargo Declarations is a regular Mecca for Eetee traders from the outlands. I saw both kinds of Martians, the cat-whiskered, man-like, yellow city dwellers and their wilder, little, brown baboon-faced cousins from the red upland deserts; pink-and-white Venusians glistening like four-foot snails under the celloplast sheaths that kept them from dehydrating in the dry Martian air; Callistans teetering like scaly green sawhorses on their four stiff-jointed legs and walking stick tails; woolly blue tree men from Titan and ponderous Europeans rolling on the little three-wheeled carts they used to carry their barrel-bellied tonnage.

"It's a smiley," I told them, holding the cage up so they could admire the soulful little brute. "From Mimas, Saturn's first moon. His name is Joey and he is very much for sale."

Everybody wanted Joey, naturally. I'd have wanted him myself if I hadn't learned from the Mimasan natives, who are as rare as smileys and a damned sight less friendly, that chewing khiff roots would immunize me against his hypnotic aura. That aura makes smileys remarkable even among Eetees, so remarkable that nobody had ever brought one in before. It's their mating call, a very practical gimmick evolved to attract each other and at the same time protect themselves from native predators while they carry on their courtship. It works on anything from swamp gnats to Syrtis Major sand snakes, and it's literally irresistible.

Joey looked something like a fist-sized marmoset shaped out of pale blue smoke, his body so insubstantial that you could see the cage wires through and behind him. It was hard to put a finger on the quality unless you had learned the hard way, but there was a weird incompleteness about him that escaped definition. Smileys are paradoxical little brutes. Unmated, they're only half material because they actually aren't complete entities. But when they mate—

"Gleef?" Joey said plaintively, yearning at the assorted faces around him and loving every one of them.

That clinched it. "How much?" somebody asked, and there was a general digging for wallets and Eetee equivalents.

I had figured my price already, allowing for dealers' profits and transferral expenses. On Earth Joey would be worth at least a hundred thousand credits to psychomedic clinics treating mental disorders ranging from simple hypertension to paranoia. He should net me twenty thousand, ten of which would go to settle a grubstake lien held by Martian Bankings against the *Annabelle*, my little eighty-foot space tug.

The other ten would leave me knee-deep in credit notes for a two week spree that would begin at the Argonaut Club, which is as far as any chunk-hopping asteroid prospector ever plans.

"FIRST let me point out," I said, giving Joey's aura time to soak in properly, "that Joey is the first smiley ever captured."

Which was strictly true, though I didn't see fit to mention the second one, a female named Cora which I had left hidden in an old abandoned oxygen reduction plant I knew out in Syrtis Major. I had two good reasons for that: they'd bring higher prices if sold separately, and I wasn't taking any chances on their getting together before I disposed of them. Anything could happen if they did.

"Worth a hundred thousand on Earth," I said. "How much am I bid?"

But nobody made me an offer. I might have known it. Some days you just can't turn an honest credit.

Joey's euphoric appeal should have had the traders scrambling for him, but I had underestimated his effect. They wanted him, sure, but the brotherly love he instilled in them made every buyer, Earth homo or Eetee, ashamed to jack up the price against his neighbor.

We compromised finally by listing Joey for proxy sale, and I took him out of Cargo Declarations to clear the air. He would be safe in the *Annabelle's* cabin because no one who got close enough to steal him would have the heart to do it, and I'd have time while the bids rolled in to sample a pitcher

or two of yellow Martian skohl down at the Argonaut Club.

Joey was safe enough, but I wasn't. I hadn't walked more than forty yards from the *Annabelle* after putting Joey away when I bumped into Captain Giles of the space-port police.

"Wait up," the Captain said. "I'll warn you this time before it happens, Bailey. If you start another riot at the Argonaut Club—"

Captain Giles was a rail-thin six-footer with a dour hatchet face burned to leather by Martian sun and wind, a hard-boiled but conscientious patrol officer who had missed his calling. He should have been a missionary, being as chaste as a Cosmicist monk and twice as stern.

I heard variations of his ultimatum every time I put down at Areopolis. But this time I had the answer to it.

"Will you step over to the *Annabelle* with me, Captain?" I asked. "I'd like your opinion on the cargo I brought in."

He went, glowering and suspicious. Sixty feet from the *Annabelle* we walked into Joey's euphoric aura, and his grumbling was shut off as if somebody had turned a spigot.

"I don't understand this," the Captain said, giving me a saintly smile that would have sent his hard-boiled crew into a mass faint. But it's really rather wonderful . . . Let me beg you again, William, to shun that disreputable Argonaut Club. Some day—"

"I know," I finished for him. "Some day your patrolies will sweep me out of there in small, unidentifiable fragments. A dirty job."

I left him there with his bright new smile wearing strange creases in his hard hatchet face and walked down from the landing apron to the street. That was when I learned that I wasn't as safe as Joey.

The instant I set foot in the street a couple of professional uglies closed in on me, a sharp-faced Earth homo and a cat-whiskered yellow Martie in bright Terran clothing. The two of them were armed with bell-mouthed freeze guns, and they were bent on business.

I never had a chance. They ushered me into a waiting sand-car and took away the

Quantrell blaster I wore buckled over my coveralls.

"We hear you got a smiley for sale, chunk-hopper," the sharp homo said while the Martie started the sand-car. "Well, we got you a buyer for it."

They didn't really need the car except for privacy. Our trip took us only half a block down the street where we stepped out at the last place I'd have expected to market a smiley—at the palatial office building of Solar Shipping, a billion-credit corporation headed by one Hume Shanig, space-line tycoon and crooked financier extraordinary.

I HAD heard plenty about Shanig, though I'd never done business with him. He had a finger in every financial pie on Mars from import houses to the Argonaut Club, which was directly across the street and which he owned outright. Dealing with Shanig, rumor said, was like stepping into a Venusian boghole—easier to get into than out of.

Shanig's uglies chivvied me into a reception room that was all skylights and soft rugs and shining saffa-wood furniture. A big desk stood in the center. Behind the desk sat Shanig's secretary.

It was almost worth being kidnapped to be able to stand and look at her. She was a beauty, a tall clean-lined redhead with all the curves a prodigal heredity ever promised a female of the species homo. And she had a warm red mouth and clear green eyes that matched her hair.

"Buzz the boss that we got his homo, Cheryl," the Earthie said. "And snap it up, baby. The Chief is but eager about this smiley deal."

The girl gave him a curt green glare. "Miss Trayne, to you," she snapped. But she pushed the buzzer on her desk, and a rasping voice from her audiphone said that we should come in.

I knew only one of the three men in the office beyond. He was a little blond truckler named Perry Acree who held a booking-clerk's berth at Cargo Declarations, and I didn't need to look twice at the smug complacency of his chicken-chinned face to guess who had tipped Shanig about my smiley.

The second was a fat, dignified homo

with a clipped gray mustache and the deliberate look of a top-flight medic. The third was Shanig himself.

Physically, the great man had seen better days. He was small and old and wizened and bald, and the creases in his sallow face could have been carved with a kit of engraver's tools. His scrawny neck hung in slack wattles, and the hooked nose and hot black eyes of him made him look like a dissipated desert buzzard. But I wasn't tempted to sell him short for even in illness Shanig had the air about him of a baited steel trap. He was an empire builder, one of these human dynamos who pile up fortunes and then die of gastric ulcers before they can spend their loot.

"I dislike bringing you here under duress, Bailey," Shanig said. He was trying to make it smooth, but even so he barked like a Syrtis Major jackal. "Dr. Humphrey will explain my reasons for being so precipitate."

The medic harumphed reluctantly and fiddled with his mustache. Plainly he didn't like any part of it.

"Mr. Shanig," he said, "suffers from a chronic condition of extreme nervous tension, a result of the years of overstrain imposed upon him by his business enterprises. I have prescribed rest and relaxation, but at this late date Mr. Shanig is constitutionally unable to pursue that course.

"He is, in a word, incapable of relaxing; yet relax he must or collapse completely. Sedatives are unsatisfactory, impairing the mental processes. Mr. Shanig does not trust hypnotherapy.

"As a consequence we find ourselves with only one alternative—a happy chance resulting from your arrival at Areopolis with this, ah, smiley."

I got it then. At first glance it was a neat enough idea; the catch as that Shanig didn't know his smileys. He couldn't put himself under Joey's euphoric golden-rule spell and still direct a big business.

And besides that I hadn't gone through the slimy hells of those Mimasian jungles to rehabilitate a burned-out old credit-shark like Hume Shanig. Joey belonged to humanity, to the poor overwrought hypertensive homos who really needed him.

"If you want my smiley to keep this old goat from snapping his leash," I said, "the

answer is no. Joey would quiet him down like a country churchyard, sure, but—"

Shanig cut me short by smacking a peremptory hand on his desk top.

"That will be all, Dr. Humphrey," he barked. "Get out."

WHEN the medic had gone Shanig turned on me. "I have no time to waste in haggling, Bailey. How much do you ask for this creature?"

I thought it over and it still read the same.

More was at stake than the wasting of Joey's talents on a bad hat like Shanig. There was the inevitable blowup that must come later. When Shanig found out what being too long under a smiley's influence could do to a homo with his financial responsibilities, there would be the devil to pay for fair.

"I don't want trouble," I said, trying to be diplomatic. "But I can't sell Joey to you. If you'd let me explain—"

"You have a commitment against your prospect ship, I believe," Shanig cut in. "An obligation commonly referred to as a grubstake lien, is it not?"

"With Martian Bankings," I admitted. "It's a couple of weeks overdue at the moment but Martian is a friendly outfit. They'll wait for their credits until I sell the smiley."

I couldn't be sure whether Shanig laughed or barked.

"I anticipated your reluctance to sell so I purchased your lien from Martian Bankings two hours ago. I know your reputed fondness for your ship, and I understand too that a similar craft cannot be bought for twice the amount of your financial obligation."

He had me cold. It was a dirty trick of Martian's to sell me out, but I could see how it was when Shanig put the screws to them.

"You are in no position to bargain with me, you simple fool," Shanig said, looking more than ever like a dissipated buzzard. "I shall make you one offer before claiming forfeit—the cancellation of your debt plus five thousand credits in cash."

He shouldn't have baited me with the *Annabelle*. I love that rusty old tub the way some homos love their women. And

after being sandbagged with Shanig's kind of persuasion I began to figure that selling Joey to him was as neat a revenge as I could ask. He deserved it—plus.

"All right," I said. "You've bought a smiley."

Shanig thumbed his buzzer and the red-head came in from the reception office with a legal-looking paper in her hand. She went straight to Shanig's desk, walking in a way to make any homo's pulse beat out of step, but when she passed Perry Acree the two of them exchanged a swift, secret look of complete understanding that actually made me flinch.

Sometimes I think I'll never understand women. Here was this gorgeous wench, five-feet-ten and built like a hermit's dream, and what did she pick? An egregious little idiot who—

"Sign here," Shanig grunted. He fitted the paper onto a desk pad and whipped it toward me along with a stylus.

It was a simple enough contract release giving me full title to the *Annabelle* plus five thousand credits in exchange for uncontested ownership to one male Mimasan smiley answering to the name of Joey.

Something about the pad-and-stylus routine rang a warning bell at the back of my mind but I was too mad to listen. I wrote "William X. Bailey" in the proper blank and the deed was done.

When Perry Acree and Shanig's hired homo signed as witnesses all of us stood up but Shanig.

"That's all," Shanig snapped, pushing a check for five thousand credits at me. "Get out!"

I took the check and went out, so mad I could feel my ears crisping. Entering the reception room again, it didn't soothe my mangled ego any to get a disdainful once-over from the redhead.

"I'm taking a week-end off with this little item to see the sights," I said, snapping the check. "Like to come along for the ride? There's a little pleasure colony up on Phobos that's out of this universe, where anything goes."

"Not with you, you swamp-stained wolf," she snapped. When I waited, grinning, she bit her lip and her eyes shot green sparks. "Beat it or I'll buzz for Perry."

II

I DIDN'T mind the brush-off but the idea of her calling for Perry Acree to toss me out fanned my slow burn to a blaze.

"That seed-sized cipher?" I scoffed. "Why, for two centi-credits I'd—"

Shanig's door opened and Perry came out. He added up the score in a blink and jumped to the conclusion that I was waiting to settle with him.

"Now look, Bill," he began. "I couldn't help it if—"

"That secret agent stunt of yours just cost me five thousand credits, Acree," I said, cutting him short. "I think you're going to be as sorry as Shanig before this is over."

He lost the little color he had. "I don't want trouble with you, Mr. Bailey! Cheryl, will you—"

The girl pushed her buzzer. Her eyes dodged mine, and I could read her mind like the back of a credit note. She was making allowances for Perry but it hurt to call for help.

Shanig's office door opened again and his two uglies came out. Both of them had freeze guns and the yellow Martie wore my Quantrell blaster tucked into his belt, but it was plain that they didn't expect to need them.

"Hey, take it easy!" Perry wailed, not wanting any part of this. "That's Blaster Bill Bailey you jerks are—"

They closed in, disregarding him, and I cracked their heads together hard enough to make their knees bend like rubber. Then I took back my Quantrell and left them holding each other up like a pair of skohl addicts.

"You can phonovise me at the Argonaut Club if you change your mind about that weekend on Phobos," I told the redhead. "But don't wait too long or this will have gone the way of all credits."

I tucked the check away and went out with Perry Acree trailing apologetically at my heels. Shanig had sent him to bring back the smiley it seemed, so I let him tag along. He left the *Annabelle* with Joey under his arm and that mesmerized Sunday-services look on his face, and I strolled down to Martian Bankings with my check.

It wasn't really a surprise to find that

Shanig had stopped payment on it. What did give me the devil of a turn, though, was realizing that he must have double-dealt me about the *Annabelle*, too. If he wouldn't honor a five-thousand-credit contract he'd certainly balk at giving up a twenty-thousand-credit ship.

I broke all sprint records back to the spaceyards and slammed the *Annabelle's* port practically in the faces of Captain Giles and a squad of patrolies who had been sent by Shanig to secure his latest acquisition.

Giles and his crew were yelling blue murder when I cut in the *Annabelle's* jets. A moment later they were racing like mad to beat the apron-flash of the blastoff.

It was all my own fault, I told myself. I should have suspected that desk-pad-and-stylus snare of Shanig's—he had slipped a telewriter plate under my contract release, and when I signed it I signed another paper, by remote control, in another office. A paper that surrendered my smiley and also my equity in the *Annabelle*.

All I had now was a worthless check and a ship spaced in defiance of legal foreclosure. I'd be lucky, I figured, if I didn't owe Shanig a few thousand credits into the bargain.

I DIDN'T hit for open space, knowing that Captain Giles would have a radar spotting-net out for me. Instead I swung the *Annabelle* eastward and whizzed over Syrtis Major toward the abandoned oxygen-reduction plant where I had hidden Cora, my other smiley. I needed a hideout while I figured out a campaign to clear myself, and there was a flimsy old warehouse at the oxy-plant that would screen the *Annabelle* nicely.

I scouted the desert carefully before drifting in for landing, and saw nothing but a great desolate ocean of gritty red sand. Back in the days when Earth was just beginning to cool off that desert might have been a landscape of sorts, but aeons of oxidation had changed all that. It was nothing now but a waste of powdered iron rust, sifted fine by a million winds and patterned by the feet of jackals.

The old reduction plant huddled in a wide, shallow depression made in years past by the scooping and hauling of sand to the

converters. It reminded me of the ghost towns I had read of as a kid, before tele-movies and stereo-spools replaced the old historical novels carried over from the twentieth century. It was never haunted by Indians and buffalo, but it had seen its share of jackals and sand snakes, and the wild, little, brown baboon-faced Marties of the deserts had smashed all its windows when the Earthies moved on.

Not many reduction plants were needed on Mars any more. The first homos to come had to wear atmosphere masks—a first-water paradox, because the rusty red deserts were full of good oxygen locked up in simple ferrous oxide form—but they soon changed that. When enough of them had come they set up atom-powered reduction plants by the hundreds, breaking the red sand back to its primal elements of iron and oxygen.

They used the iron in their first cities and they let the oxygen go free. Before the Big Jump there used to be arguments, I've heard, to the effect that Earthies could never live permanently on Mars because the air was too thin and oxygen-poor. But unlocking oxygen from the sand solved half the problem, and the other half never existed.

In the .38 gravity of Mars, any physical action requires only a fraction more than one-third as much effort as it would require on Earth. And only one-third as much oxygen is needed to sustain that effort.

So a hundred years after Earthmen abandoned the Syrtis Major plant, I had a perfect place to lick my wounds in privacy. I berthed the *Annabelle* in the old warehouse, opened her up from bow to stern to let out the stink of stale tobacco smoke and machine oil, and brought my second smiley out of the dusty records vault where I had hidden her.

Cora was as affectionate as Joey and twice as eager. She made an earnest effort to hypnotize me with that euphoric mating call of hers, but when the khiff root kept me immune she settled down to staring wistfully across the desert toward Areopolis where Joey radiated back at her.

I broke out the emergency rations I lived on while prospecting the asteroids or moon-hopping, and sat down to think. I had to clear myself with Captain Giles or I'd never

see Areopolis or the Argonaut Club again. I had to break Shanig's claim against the *Annabelle* or I'd be an asteroid prospector without a ship. In other words, a bum.

And besides that I'd have to settle with Shanig for the slimy trick he had pulled on me or I'd be laughed out of the System. For some reason, considering that angle reminded me again of the unlikely old romances I'd read of the days when people rode horses and steam engines and chivvied buffalo around with red-hot stamping irons. They prospected for the rare earths—gold was a precious metal then, I think—and they had to keep their reputations as he-men intact or go down before the pellet guns of their fellow homos.

It seemed to me that things hadn't changed so much, after all. I had some small reputation of my own in the outlands, and if I let a wizened little credit-shark like Shanig beat me I was done for.

So I sat in front of the rickety old warehouse and munched my E-rations and thought about those things until finally, being the honest type, I had to admit that none of them mattered half as much as getting back to Areopolis and making another pitch at a streamlined redhead with scornful green eyes. There was still an outside chance that Cheryl Trayne might have phoned me at the Argonaut Bar about that weekend on Phobos, and . . .

I was daydreaming about that when the shutter-speed sunset of Mars flicked away the day and left me sitting in darkness with the Syrtis Major wind sharp and cold on my face and the wild howling of desert jackals in my ears.

III

FOR three interminable days I sat around the old oxy-plant, eating and sleeping and thinking, and the monotony of it got deadlier and deadlier. I couldn't even switch on my communications equipment for the news since Captain Giles and his lads might be making spot patrols, and the localized radiation of my receiving unit would be enough to pinpoint me.

I had a fair idea of what went on with Shanig, though. No homo can operate after his fashion without making enemies, and

the bigger his business the more powerful his enemies. Vigilance becomes the price of existence, financially speaking, and it was on that point that I figured Shanig had overreached himself.

All that was pure guesswork, of course, until the afternoon of the third day. Then I had unexpected confirmation of it, brought by the last person on Mars I dreamed of seeing.

I was in the *Annabelle's* cabin with Cora when the helicar settled in front of my makeshift hangar. I came out on the double with my Quantrell ready, and saw Cheryl Trayne standing in the warehouse entrance. The sun, hanging low on the desert's rim, outlined her tantalizingly against a blaze of light and made her hair a shimmering halo of burnished copper.

It was so wonderful to see her, but at the same time I was a little disappointed. It had been a pleasant possibility that she might change her mind about that Phobos trip, but to have her track me down like this.

"How did you find me?" I demanded. "And who's with you?"

She gave me a child's trusting smile, a reversal of her old haughty brushoff that gave me the devil of a jolt until I remembered Cora in the *Annabelle's* cabin. Cheryl was as deep under Cora's spell now as she must have been under Joey's before—

"Never mind that," I said. "How did you get away from Shanig's smiley? Is Shanig out of his trance, too?"

She looked puzzled, as if she were trying to remember something tremendously important.

"I came alone," she said. "I traced you through Joey, after Mr. Shanig sent Perry away with him. I remembered then how Joey always faced toward the east when he was quiet. He used to crouch for hours in his cage when no one was near him and stare in this direction. After he was gone it came to me that he sensed another smiley somewhere was calling to it. And if there was another smiley on Mars . . ."

"Then I had brought it and I'd be with it," I finished for her. "Neat enough. I only hope no one else thought of it."

She gave me that trusting smile again, and my conscience dealt me a sharp nudge. I went over and gave her a khiff root.



M/Sgt.
Hubert L. Lee, USA
Medal of Honor



FOUR TIMES Sergeant Lee's platoon had taken, then lost, the hill near Ip-o-ri. On the fifth try, the sergeant, though hurt, was leading. A Red grenade hit him, seriously wounding both legs. Refusing assistance, he advanced by crawling, rising to his knees to fire. He caught a rifle bullet in the back. Still he wouldn't be stopped. Finally, with 12 survivors of his platoon, he took the hill, then let the stretcher-bearers carry him away. Today Sergeant Hubert Lee says:

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"Chew it," I said. "Never mind the taste. It'll make you as good as new."

She took it obediently, and a couple of minutes later something like horror chased the contentment out of her face. She stared at me, her green eyes turning angry.

"You must have enjoyed seeing me like that," she said acidly. "It never occurred to me that I'd fall under the other smiley's influence if I found you or I'd never have—"

"You'd never have dared come at all," I said. "You'd have been afraid I'd bring up that Phobos jaunt again, and you couldn't have said no with Cora around."

She bit her lip in the way she had, and I could see her admitting reluctantly that she might just possibly have misjudged me.

"All right, you found me," I said. "Now give. What happened? How did Shanig get rid of Joey and why did you hunt me down if you're still nursing a phobia against Phobos?"

"SHANIG'S underofficials at Solar Shipping rescued him," she said. "They couldn't reach him at first because everyone they sent fell under the smiley's influence. But they had to do something. Shanig was like an irresponsible child, giving away company holdings as well as his own. They were so frantic that—"

"I tried to warn him," I pointed out. "He turned cherub the instant Perry arrived with Joey, didn't he? Word of it got around in nothing flat and his competitors, his enemies, starting phonovising him right and left. They must have stood in line at the telewrite stations to take his holdings and Solar's. A couple of days of that must have practically ruined him and Solar Shipping as well. How did they snap him out of it?"

"They phonovised him to step out on his window balcony. When he came out to the rail they knocked him off with a freeze gun and caught him with a net in the street below. He almost went mad when he realized what he had done."

I grinned for two reasons. I had been right and Shanig had lost his shirt. It served him right.

"So Shanig is starting from scratch again. What line is he taking?"

For the first time she looked scared.

"A line you didn't anticipate. Solar's

stockholders have ordered him to recover what he gave away, and he's taking no chances on losing what personal holdings he has left. He tried to eliminate Perry and me the minute he snapped back to normal, and he'll have you erased as soon as you're taken."

I stared at her. "That's going pretty far, even for Shanig. Why should he beam us out?"

She gave me an exasperated look. "Because he's afraid you might force Perry and me to swear that he tricked you on your contract release. It didn't matter before when he was powerful enough to smother the charge, but he's been so hard hit that he can't risk a reversal of that contract now. Don't you see? If you brought suit for reparations and won it would ruin him. The only way Shanig can make himself safe is to eliminate you as claimant or to get rid of Perry and me as witnesses."

It was a deadly sort of logic. I had expected Shanig to yell foul but I hadn't looked for a planet-wide homo hunt with myself as the quarry.

"It's up to us, then," I said. "We'll have to settle Shanig first or he'll get us as sure as sin."

She didn't look so frightened now as embarrassed.

"That's why I came to you. We can keep out of Shanig's way, perhaps, but poor Perry is trapped. Someone will have to get him out of that horrible place before Shanig reaches him."

I gaped a little over that one. "What horrible place? Where is Perry?"

"At the Argonaut Club," she said. "As soon as Shanig was himself again he photovised Perry and ordered him to take the smiley there, partly to get Joey away and partly to cut down breakage expense at the Argonaut. Perry's been there all day, associating with Eetee outlanders and drinking skohl like any common spacehand. He'll drink himself to death before Shanig finds a way to get to him, if we don't hurry."

I laughed until my face hurt. I couldn't help it. The idea of Perry Acree drinking himself blind in the Argonaut's rowdy company was too much. Thinking about the prayer-meeting hush that Joey must be laying over the toughest shot-slot in the System

made it all the funnier until the real reason for Cheryl's hunting me down percolated through my skull and sobered me up.

Her motive was enlightening, but not flattering:

"SO THAT'S why you risked your luscious hide to find me," I said. "To talk me into dragging that idiot dwarf out of the Argonaut. Am I right?"

She looked hopping mad and pleading at the same time, which is quite a trick even for a redhead.

"You can do it if anyone can. I checked on your background this morning, and it seems that—well, that you may not be the windbag I thought you after all. One asteroid prospector told me that you—"

"Never believe a chunk-hopper," I told her. "They lie for fun or on principle, depending on the circumstances. But I'm not interested in Perry Acree. If he hadn't tipped Shanig to my smiley none of this would have happened. The *Annabelle* would be clear of debt and I'd be in the Argonaut instead of Perry. Why should I risk my neck for that simpering sycophant?"

She had trouble telling me why. Having to ask my help burned her plenty, and its being Perry's fault made it worse. She turned pink and talked in circles, not meeting my eye, and when I finally guessed how she had meant to persuade me you could have clubbed me down with a sand thistle.

"You really *are* sold on that puling parasite," I said. "Look, are you sure he's worth a weekend on Phobos?"

"Beast!" she cried, and slapped my face.

"Good enough," I said when my ears stopped ringing. "Faint heart never haggled with fair hell-cat. Let's go rescue your skohl-swilling light of love."

I moved Cora's little tungsten cage into the helicar and Cheryl took us up. We didn't have to wait for darkness. The split-second Martian twilight took care of that in the wink of an eye.

The two-hour flight was almost pleasant. The stars over our speeding helicar glittered down like far, frosty eyes and the gritty red ocean of desert under us lost its harshness and took on a magic pattern of soft, shifting shadows. Phobos paced us across the black aight sky like a swift silver morning-star,

and the little gray jackals crept out of their dens and howled at her with all the pent-up loneliness of a million, million years.

Cheryl shivered at their keening, and the thought that she could be as skittish as other women gave me a little jolt of surprise.

"Mournful little beggars, aren't they?" I said. "I wonder what they'd think of Earth, with its big yellow moon all night in the sky?"

Cheryl didn't answer, but it seemed to me that she thawed out a little. It was almost cozy in the helicar after that until the dusty neon haze of Areopolis ballooned up out of the desert.

IV

WE CAME in low to avoid any radar net the port patrol might have up, and entered the sleeping city above the shadowy warrens of the native district.

"You'll have to be careful," Cheryl warned. "And quick. Shanig's men will be watching the Argonaut, and the police won't have forgotten you so soon."

"I'll be careful," I said, knowing better than she the sort of odds Shanig would favor. "The next question is where do I find you after I drag that case of arrested development out of there?"

She gave me an address. "I took a room there as soon as I realized that Shanig was after me. I doubt that he's been able to trace me so soon."

We dipped into an apartment house section and Cheryl set the helicar down in a night-quiet street. "Apartment Six-A," she said. And then, unexpectedly: "Take care of yourself, Bill, please. Don't do anything rash!"

I patted her shoulder reassuringly. "You may have to rescue *me* before the night is over," I told her. "Stand by your phonovision and be ready to bring Cora in a hurry if I call you. I can't risk taking her into the Argonaut because of Joey, but I may need her if I run afoul of Shanig. Got it?"

She nodded and gave me her phonovision code. I got out of there and headed down the street while she took the helicar up to her apartment house roof landing.

It wasn't far. Fifteen minutes of fast walking through the back streets brought

me up a dark alley to the Argonaut's side entrance. The service door was locked, of course, and as a consequence none of Shanig's uglies were guarding it.

I kicked it in and went through a dusty corridor into the smoky, skohl-pungent bar-room.

The instant I was inside I knew that Cheryl had been right. Joey was there, and he was radiating for all he was worth. There was the spellbound crowd for proof of that.

The Argonaut Club was known the breadth of the System as the toughest dive that ever sold a drunken rockethand a pitcher of drugged skohl. I wound up there every time I touched Mars, and I knew the dump down to the latest ray-burn on its dingy plastoid walls. You hit some pretty rowdy shot-slots in the other spaceports, but the Argonaut topped them all. The Argonaut was rough.

Ordinarily. Tonight it looked like a missionary's picnic.

At the bar, Earthies sporting two-week passage beards and Quantrell blasters bucked over grimy rocketroom coveralls, rubbed elbows with cat-whiskered yellow city Martians and their vicious little baboon-faced cousins from the deserts. Woolly blue tree men from Titan drank with squishy Venusians and tentacled Ionians. I saw a couple of Callistans in a corner, braced saw-horse-fashion on their jointless legs and sticklike tails, grinning happily while they fraternized with a pair of ponderous Europeans. The Europeans, coy as two honeymooning hippos under Joey's spell, blubbered amiably back and rolled in small polite circles on their little three-wheeled carts.

Even, the bouncer was happy.

This last was an Earthie, a big, battered homo named Husky Harrigan who tipped the scales at two-fifty Earthweight and looked like a tuskless Mercurian sandhog, bristles and all. I had run into difficulties with him before. He had the disposition of a thwarted ape, wore brass knuckles the way other men wore finger rings, and was the prime reason for the Argonaut's tough reputation.

But tonight Harrigan was as gentle as a dove, circulating through the crowd and shaking hands with anything that had a

hand to shake.

I spotted Perry Acree at once. He was sitting at a table with two Earthies and a spiny pink Ganymedan, drinking skohl straight from the pitcher and staring soulfully at nothing in particular. I made a beeline for his table but brought up short when I heard Husky Harrigan roaring my name.

Force of habit made me set myself for trouble, but under Joey's spell, Harrigan was everybody's friend, even mine. He put out a hairy paw and grinned like a crocodile, whinnying with joy and showing a set of second-rate bridgework where somebody had kicked out a handful of teeth.

"Hey, kids, it's Blaster Bill Bailey!" he bellowed. "C'mon and have fun, Willie. First drink on the house!"

I nearly clipped him for that "Willie" crack before I thought. Not that I had scruples about clouting an oaf like Harrigan when he was in no position to strike back. I just couldn't afford the delay. Captain Giles' patrolies might be along any minute. And there was always Shanig.

SO I pushed past Harrigan and yanked Perry to his feet.

"Cheryl's waiting for you, Stupid," I said. "Snap to it, before I write you off and keep the date myself."

He grinned vacuously and came along like a lamb.

The two patrolies looked in through the swinging doors up front when Perry and I were halfway to the service corridor. Their sunburned faces lighted up when they saw me, and they shoved the doors wider to command the room with their bell-mouthed freeze guns. Behind them on the street stood their tandem air-scooter, lights on and motor purring.

"You're under arrest, Bailey," one of them called. He was a corporal, and it was written all over him that he saw a sergeant's rating coming for this night's work. "Come out of that!"

"I got a firmer grip on Perry's collar.

"Come and get me," I called back, knowing what would happen if they did.

They came in on the double with their freeze guns ready—and halted, looking sheepish, when the smiley's aura got to them.

"Aw, forget it," the corporal said. "You're a good guy, Bailey. Go ahead. Go anywhere you like."

"Sure," the other seconded. "Take our air-scooter if you want. Need any extra credits where you're going?"

I headed for the service with Perry again but we had waited too long. One of Shanig's uglies was standing in the doorway with a foolish grin on his face, and I knew there would be others waiting in the alley outside. And those others wouldn't be under Joey's influence.

So I cut for the front entrance instead, dragging Perry like a bag of old laundry. The patrolies' air-scooter stood purring at the curb. I draped Perry across it and jumped for the operator's seat, expecting to be beamed down any second. I'd have made it, too, but for Perry.

Perry had taken on a monumental load of skohl during the day, and the instant he was out of Joey's influence the inflated little ego of him demanded to be heard. He scrambled off the air-scooter, swelled out his size thirty-two chest and launched into an old rocketroom ballad—a smutty saga listing the personal iniquities of the Captain Crow who led the first Mars flight just before the turn of the century.

In nineteen hundred and ninety-two
A homo from Milwaukee
Warmed up his jets and—

I quieted him with a rabbit punch and tossed him back on the air-scooter, but the damage was done. I hit the control seat again just as Shanig's crew swarmed out of the alley and surrounded us.

The air-scooter took off like a rocket when I gave it the gun, plowing straight through them. I hung on somehow, but Perry wasn't so lucky. He bounced once and pitched off, square into the enemy's hands.

When I looked back at the first street intersection they had scooped him up and were headed toward Solar Shipping in a hurry. The sight reassured me a little. They hadn't blasted Perry on the spot, which meant that they would probably hold him as hostage until they got Cheryl as well. One witness at large was as dangerous to Shanig as two, and the chances were he wouldn't risk beaming out one unless he could be

sure of both.

I took the only course left, doubling the air-scooter back and skimming toward Shanig's offices.

V

THE way the situation added up reminded me of the old historical thrillers I'd read as a kid, most of them written in the days when our rough-and-ready ancestors bought contraband skohl from underground talk-gentiles and rival groups of uglies hijacked each other with torpedoes. It was something like a present-day telemovie gripper in a sense, only there wasn't any Colonel Super in this plot to lend me a hand.

Not that I wasted time looking for help. I wasn't used to it.

Outside the Solar Shipping building I lifted the air-scooter and swooped up to the balcony outside Shanig's office windows. There wasn't time to set it down. I needed every second to get inside before Shanig could give the alarm.

I jumped, and the air-scooter went on without me into the night. It wouldn't have worked on Earth, but under Mars' .38 gravity an athletic homo has all the breaks. I landed just inside the guard-rail and dived through the balcony windows with a great crashing of glass before Shanig could clap a hand to the buzzer on his desk.

"Don't touch it," I said, and turned my Quantrell on him.

"You!" Shanig barked. His face went sallower than ever, but his hot black eyes didn't waver. "What do you want here?"

Down the corridor rose a sudden babel of voices—Shanig's crew returning with their prize.

"They got Acree," I said, heading for the phonovision unit beside Shanig's desk. "But if you make a sound before they get here you won't be able to use him. Clear?"

The screen lit up when I touched the switch. I punched the code Cheryl had given me, and drew the first deep breath I'd had for an hour when she looked out at me.

"Bring Cora over to Shanig's office on the double," I said. "I'm going to need her but quick!"

I cut her off without waiting for an answer and punched another number. Captain

Giles stared out at me this time, his weathered hatched face clownish with astonishment.

"Get a crew of patrolies up to Shanig's offices," I said. "And make it fast or there's going to be more excitement here than you can write off your records in a month."

For the first time Shanig looked worried. He saw no threat in Cheryl's coming, not knowing about my second smiley. But if Captain Giles should arrive before Perry could be moved—

The crew of uglies outside crossed me up by buzzing Shanig's audiphone. "We got the little homo, Chief. Shall we bring him in?"

Shanig, knowing that I couldn't afford to beam him at this stage of the game, tipped them before I could stop him. "Take him away. Bailey's here!"

I jumped for the door, hoping to grab Perry before they got him away. I was too late. They were already out of the reception office. All I saw of Perry Acree was his heels.

That left us at stalemate. Shanig couldn't get away, and I couldn't leave him unguarded to go after Perry. I was racking my brain for the next move when it was taken out of my hands.

The phonovision screen beside Shanig's desk lighted up and one of his uglies looked out. "We got him where he won't be found, Chief. What next?"

And I let Shanig beat me to the jump again. "The girl is coming here. Intercept her!"

I made sure it wouldn't happen again by raying the phonovision unit to a heap of smoking junk. Reflected heat from the flash curled Shanig's eyebrows, but he didn't flinch.

"That finishes you, Bailey," he said. "My men have Acree safe. They'll have the girl the instant she appears. Under the circumstances it should be quite entertaining to watch you prove your position to the police."

He had me cold. Shanig could afford to wait but I couldn't.

IT TURNED out that Shanig's handymen didn't share his confidence in the police. I heard them getting set in the reception-

room corridor to block any dash I might make. When I sneaked a look through the balcony windows I caught a glimpse of another group working like beavers in the building across the alley. They were setting up a tripod affair which I recognized at a glance as a sleep-bomb catapult.

They had it charged to fire when Captain Giles and his patrolies arrived. A babble of confusion rose in the corridor again, and the Captain's harsh bellow silenced it like a hand across the mouth. A moment later he called through the doorway: "Stand fast, Bailey. We're coming in, and God help you if you give us trouble!"

I stood fast, giving up any hope of Cheryl's showing up in time. Having Cora along should make it easy enough for her to get into the building, but even Cora couldn't help if Captain Giles had already dragged me away.

Giles came around Shanig's desk toward me, his hatchet face thunderous. "I've warned you often enough, Bailey. This time you've gone too far."

Shanig treated himself to one of his sandpaper chuckles. "He'll probably give you some wild story designed to clear himself, Captain. Don't believe a word of it. I trusted him, and you can see what it led to!"

The Captain was taking my Quantrell blaster when my reprieve came. One of Shanig's uglies burst into the office with disaster written all over him.

"Chief, the girl's coming up in the lift with another smiley! The whole lower floor is hypnotized. She'd have got me too if the lift hadn't carried me out of reach!"

I'll give Shanig credit for this—he thought fast. He added up the score in a flash and lunged across the desk, yelling for his startled uglies to follow up. If Cheryl got to us with the smiley the jig was up, and he knew it.

He ripped the Quantrell blaster out of Captain Giles' hand and turned it on us. He meant to wipe out the lot and clear himself by laying the carnage to a battle between me and the patrol.

It was close, but not close enough.

A sudden serenity wiped the tension off his face like chalk marks off a blackboard. Captain Giles and his patrolies slacked off with him, caught in the same euphoric spell,

They stood smiling and docile while Cheryl Trayne strode in with Cora's little tungsten cage under her arm. If she had looked good to me before, right then she looked like a red-haired angel.

"Good girl," I said, and took over from there.

Shanig confessed on the spot to the slimy deal he had pulled over me, and signed a statement to that effect. He got on the reception-room phonovision and ordered his crew in the adjoining building to drop everything and return Perry Acree at once. He destroyed the bogus contract and took back the elastic check he had given me, and he enjoyed doing it. Cora, sensing Joey so close in the Argonaut Bar across the street, was working her mating call overtime.

"It was really inconsiderate of you to swindle our young friend William," the Captain said to Shanig. "Of course you won't object to serving a light sentence—say five years—to make amends?"

"Certainly not," Shanig said brightly, beaming back at him. "My only regret is that I must be separated from this adorable creature. I love smileys."

He went over to the desk where Cheryl had left Cora's cage and fondled the little brute through the wires. He played the very devil in doing it, too. Somehow or other the cage door had worked loose during the time it had been banged about, and Shanig's fumbling hands slid it open.

Cora was out of the cage and through the broken balcony windows in a smoky bluish flash, whizzing like a bullet toward the Argonaut Club and Joey.

VI

EVERYBODY snapped back to normal with a roar. There was a frantic rush of Shanig's uglies trying to escape and of Giles' patrolies collaring them again. I took no chances with Shanig. I turned my Quantrell on him and held him fast.

Hell broke loose in the Argonaut then. Even before the confusion quieted in Shanig's office we could hear the din that went up across the street.

From our balcony windows we had a grandstand view of the Argonaut's more timid patrons exploding out of the place

and tearing down the street, wobbling and lurching each in his own outlandish fashion from the assortment of Eetee drinks they had taken aboard under Joey's spell. The rougher souls left inside had begun a battle royal that raised a bedlam wilder than a robot rooting section at a rocket-games stadium.

"What is it!" Captain Giles yelled, goggling at a barrel-bellied European who shot out of the Argonaut with a pack of little baboon-faced Marties harrying its speeding cart from the rear. "What have you done now?"

"Shanig has just ruined a forty-thousand-credit investment for me," I told him, "by letting my pair of smileys get together. That peace-be-on-you feeling they've been broadcasting is a thing of the past. They feel just the opposite now, and so will anyone who goes near them."

I had to explain it twice before they got it.

Mimasan smileys, as I've said before, are weird little brutes. Unmated, their euphoric mating calls attract them to each other and at the same time protects them from native predators. The catch is that when they mate they coalesce, each complementing the insubstantiality of the other to become a single material entity.

And then, of course, there's no further need of their wistful, coaxing aura.

After that they hate everybody, being newlyweds and not wanting to be disturbed, so of course they radiate an exactly opposite aura that guarantees them the privacy their joint little heart craves. Nothing can come near enough to interrupt them without becoming so rabidly angry that it has to rush off somewhere else looking for something to fight. But you see how it goes.

"And from the row going on in the Argonaut," I finished, "I'd say that Joey and Cora are definitely on their honeymoon."

"You mean they'll be like that always?" Cheryl asked, wide-eyed. "That no one can go near them without flying into a rage?"

"Not always," I said glumly. "Just for five years. After that they divide by fission into a dozen or so baby smileys, and after that the rat-race starts over again. The progeny will be worth plenty, but who's going to stand guard over that amalgamated little

demon while it broadcasts hate and damnation in every direction? I won't, and there's not a homo in the System that would take the job for love or—"

The answer hit me like a thumb in the eye, bang in the middle of a sentence.

"Captain Giles," I said. "I've a suggestion that . . ."

The Captain got it on first bounce. For the first time in history he laughed without benefit of smiley.

It worked out neatly enough, at that. An Areopolitan court decreed that Shanig, being bound by the requirements of Martian law to expiate his crimes with as little expense to the polity as possible, should spend the five years of his sentence guarding Joey-Cora in a force-wall detention area to be set up in Syrtis Major. By the time his term ended my combination smiley would have fissioned, Shanig would have paid his debt to society and my investment would have paid dividends.

It could have been worse. For the time being I was out some forty thousand credits, but I managed to salvage enough for a moderate celebration by contracting with the government to furnish *kebiff* roots from Mimas to keep Shanig from going berserk under Joey-Cora's influence.

The arrangement wasn't too hard on Shanig, even. The worst of it would be the isolation—that, and the packs of Syrtis Major jackals that would crowd around the force-wall of nights and howl for his blood.

"GOOD enough," I told Cheryl after the trial. "That leaves just one small detail to be arranged. I'll have to wangle another loan from Martian Bankings."

She raised a slim brow. "Loan? For a grubstake?"

"For our weekend on Phobos," I said. "Remember?"

She laughed. "There's another little detail you overlooked, William. My ring size is five and one-half."

"Ring?" I said. "Oh, a ring . . . Would you rather have a Tellurian diamond, an A-belt fire-opal, or—"

"Nothing expensive," she cut me off. "Something simpler would be more appropriate, I think. Under the circumstances, I'd

suggest a plain gold band."

I gaped at her like a swamp-guppy until it seeped through my skull that she was in dead earnest.

"Wait up," I said. "What about Perry Acree?"

She snapped her fingers. "*That* for Perry. I thought I wanted the little creep until you brought him back, but after that I couldn't bear the sight of him."

"You mean," I said, grasping at any straw, "that you really want to be—"

"Married," she said definitely. "First and firmly, or no Phobos trips!"

"It wouldn't last," I argued. "Being an A-belt prospector's wife is no snap, Cheryl. I'd be out in the *Annabelle* for weeks on end, slamming around in God knows what kind of dangers. And one of these days I wouldn't come back at all and you'd be a widow."

"*You* wouldn't be slamming around," she corrected me softly. "*We* would, Willie dear. I'd be with you every minute."

That did it. It was "Willie dear" already, and she'd be with me every minute. Even in port . . .

"I'll have to give this some serious thought," I said. "Look, you wouldn't want us to plunge into a deal that wouldn't work out, would you?"

"Of course not," she said with a demure certainty that made my blood curdle. "But this will work, Willie darling. I'll see to that."

I got out of there and went down to Martian Bankings in the devil of a hurry. They were apologetic over selling my grubstake lien, and were glad to advance me a few thousand credits against Joey-Cora's expectations.

For once I passed the Argonaut Club without even looking back. A homo with a skinful of skohl is short on resistance, and resistance just then was what I needed most.

When I reached the blastoff aprons, the *Annabelle's* rusty old hulk was the sweetest sight I ever saw. I pointed her lovely, meteor-dented nose at the sky and blasted off, and the howling of her jets was like a lullaby in my ears. The starry backdrop of space ahead was like a cosmos-sized painting of all Creation, a master canvas done.

THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 3)

are not overpriced for the worth of their contents. (Mrs. Corby, how could you!)

6. Lastly, PLANET is just as good, if not better, than the other current publications. (Edwin Sigler—please to join a little game of Russian Roulette as soon as possible.)

NOTE TO HELEN HUBER: Thanks for the information, gal. It was very interesting.

TO S. VERNON MCDANIEL: Let's get this straight right now: I'm not a scientist, or even pretend to be. My letter concerning Dr. Braun's book was just a quotation, and had nothing to do with my own personal opinions on the matter of space flight. I see no reason why a slower moving rocket couldn't leave the atmosphere belt if it had enough fuel. Sorry, McDaniel. I'm unable to quote you Dr. Von Braun's calculations which show that a slower moving rocket must return to Earth, because I don't have his book at hand. Anyway, re: your Sept. letter—you have some very good points there. Maybe some of the other fen can answer your questions.

A NOTE TO THE FEN IN GENERAL: Since my "Space Medicine" letter, I have obtained access to certain information concerning space flight. This source states that space flight has already been solved and at least two trips to the Moon have been made about 1944 in a special Circle-Wing plane. Water was used as fuel—cracked into the two separate gases, hydrogen and oxygen. A complicated process. Also it says that Flying Saucers (or "Circle-Wing planes") are space ships which use a "Ghyt" motor.

Fans—if you have anything to say in regard to the preceding, please say it in the VIZIGRAPH. Please don't write to me personally. I realize that there'll be quite a few scoffers in the crowd, in reference to the mentioned statements. All I can say is go ahead and scoff, but you won't get anywhere. I may be wrong—granted—but how do you know I'm not right? Ha! You don't.

MAVIS HARTMAN,
Moon Maid

APPLES—GRAPES—LEMONS?

Box 89
Runnede, N. J.

Dear Editor:

I'd like to say a few words to and in defense of PLANET STORIES. This is in regard to the recent trends that science-fiction is taking, *i. e.*, the shift to characterization in a story. Today the stories are being plotted along lines of character chiefly. That has become the fashion, but is it correct? I think not.

A story can be plotted along three lines: (1) Action can be featured (as PLANET STORIES does), (2) Characterization can be featured, and (3) The Setting can be featured. In almost all stories, only one of these three things will be most prominent.

It's easy to see why. Writing a story that completely blends action, characterization, and setting is almost impossible to do. In fact, if we are to take the word of those who know a good deal about such things, it has NEVER been done! It is true that there have been occasions when it came close. The novel ANNA KARENINA is an example, but such things come very rarely. (Although I'd like to say that for my money OLD UGLY FACE by Talbot Mundy, with its blend of unusually fine characterization, with its magnificently portrayed setting of the Himalayas, and

with its breath-stopping action, comes very close to being a great novel.)

Since few editors have any amount of great novels flung on their desks at a constant rate they have had to depend on something else. Their policies have developed along certain lines and in certain ways. They have learned to buy stories that were slanted to one of the plot lines of action, characterization, and setting (and combinations). If a great novel ever dropped on their editorial desks it would probably burst their brains or something equally pleasant (I've no mercy for editors). They probably wouldn't buy it, because it would vary from their usual practices. Writers know this, and, since they are not much different from normal people, they don't write stories that they know they won't sell.

Characterization is the most important thing in a story but it doesn't have to dominate a story.

Since human beings are human beings they are naturally most interested in human beings. When they are reading of the adventures of a person they have to be able to believe in that person; he has to be enough like themselves or what they wish to be to interest them (Or you can have reverse characterization and make the "hero," the central character, be the exact opposite of what the reader is—that'll hold interest by having the reader hate him!). At any rate: it's someone you feel does or can exist.

PLANET STORIES characters have that kind of characterization. Some of them are flat characters (Like Paul in THE SLAVES OF VENUS: Paul had one characteristic only: retribution, the force of good conquering evil. To have brought in facts that he liked to drink beer, hated blondes with poodle cuts, and played a Venusian nose flute for relaxation would have given him more personality, but would have taken away his dramatic quality—would have made him sort of ridiculous), some are rounded a little, and some are perfectly round (and possess a great many of the things that make up a person in real life).

But it has yet to be proved whether a fully developed character is any more important than a flat character, or any better. The only characters you need are those you can believe in.

So it comes down to this: No way of telling a story is better than any other way. A character study is no greater than an action tale or a setting story. It's like trying to compare apples, grapes and lemons to each other. Each are good and wanted, but only personal opinion can place one above the other.

So keep PLANET STORIES in the action department, but also try to make us feel the atmosphere of another world and let us have characters that we believe in. But action comes first!

Cordially,

DAVE HAMMOND

THE CORBY POUNCE

55 Taylor Avenue,
East Keansburg, N. J.

Dear Editor:

In the September issue Gregg Calkins pounced on me with all the outraged fury of an Inquisitor who has just discovered a suspected heretic. Ordinarily I wouldn't even bother answering him, but my feminist ire has been aroused. Inconsistency (and I deny that my letter was inconsistent) has never been a female prerogative. Surprising as it may be to young Mr. Calkins, the mighty male has been known to have his inconsistent moments too.

As a collector of sorts I agree with Gregg that mere money doesn't measure the worth of a collection

to the collector. Even my husband thinks it a little silly of me to collect songs and music when I neither own nor play any instrument. But then I wouldn't dream of berating anyone else for not having a similar collection, or even not wanting to have one, as Gregg does.

About two years ago when I moved to my present address, lack of space made it necessary for me to get rid of many things, among them the greater part of my book collection. I kept only those I couldn't bear to part with. That took some doing because I didn't want to part with any at all. So you see, Gregg, I am fully aware of the intangible worth of a book. I merely stated, and I still do, that for me, as a non-typical STF fan, most books in the STF-fantasy field were over-priced. The typical active fan collects anything and everything published in this field regardless of its literary worth. This, IN MY OPINION, is silly. Or perhaps, Gregg, you don't think women should have opinions contrary to those of the incomparable male.

There are many books I would like to own, among them the Willy Ley books on rockets and space travel, but as a housewife and mother of three children I have only a small personal allowance which must be spread over as much reading matter as possible. This fact limits me to magazines and pocket books. Sure I am as Gregg scornfully calls me, "price-conscious." Who isn't, these days?

Nor am I worried about fandom "outgrowing" me. I have already said I was not a true "fan," but a "reader."

Sincerely,

MRS. MARY CORBY

RECOVERED

1471 Marine Drive,
Bellingham, Washington

Dear Editor,

Anderson's back on the cover of PS again after a long and much lamented two month absence. Who did the cover on the Sept. issue, anyway? Vestal? Don't you ever let A. Anderson go . . . as PLANET is just not itself without him. The babe on Nov. is beautiful, the brawn is well painted, and the blem is comic bookish but good. The background is Anderson at his best.

Immediately after glancing at the cover, I descended three flights of stairs to our cellar, below our cellar, below our cellar, to show this ish to my pet BEM (it can't read but it loves the pics). For hours it stared at the lead pic by Kelly Freas. Finally, I was able to tear this ish away from it though and turn to La Vizi.

After reading it, a horrible thought struck me . . . not a single laugh . . . not one good old wisecrack. Where are all the corny epistles that used to clutter

Vizi's pages? The last Vizi was quite serious, even a bit technical . . . gah-h-h.

Well, the next ish (Jan.) starts off a new year again. May it be bigger and better for STF than even '52 was.

Sincerely,

NAAMAN PETERSON

Ed's Note: Yep, Vestal rendered the Sept. cover. And as for you Naaman, how horrible, not a single wisecrack.

TERSE REPORT

464—19th St.,
Santa Monica,
California

Dear Ed.,

I'm speechless with joy over the Nov. issue of PLANET. Finally, the cover has no sex, although the femme's mug is plastered all over the cover. Why, oh why, can't we have a cover without a female for a change. I guess the cover is the only thing I didn't like. So sorry.

AS IT WAS was good enough, but I think you would have saved money if you bought it as a short. My favorite this issue was CAPTAIN CHAOS with the Pike illustration.

Happily yours,

TOM PIPER

BELOW THE AFRICAN SKY

8 Paley Street,
Southernwood
East London
South Africa

Dear Editor,

I have just finished reading the May, 1952, issue of PLANET and would like to give you my verdict on it.

WAR MAID OF MARS gets my first vote. This is the first time I have read a Poul Anderson story. I hope to read many more of his in the future. SPACE MEN ARE BORN comes second. I like the way it started off:

O jewel of the eastern sky,
O mother of many things,
Bring home your sons to safety
From the stars to Saturn's rings.

I have a request to make, please. Will one of your gallant male readers send me the issue containing SARGASSO OF LOST STARSHIPS as I have been unable to obtain it over here. Us poor girls 'round these parts can only buy space mags second hand as the men folk grab them as soon as they reach the bookshops. Hope someone can help me out.

MISS EILEEN SMITH

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Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too. . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this **READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU**! Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

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Let me show you how you can be your own boss. Many NRI trained men start their own business with capital earned in spare time. Robert Dohmen, New Prague, Minn., whose store is shown at left, says, "Am now tied in with two Television outlets and do warranty work for dealers. Often fall back to NRI textbooks for information."

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